

Volunteering Has Changed, 300 Fair Peers Said.

How do you recruit volunteers for boring token or ticket booth roles? Start with why this role matters. Photo by Deb Brown.

Good News About Who Volunteers Now and Where To Find Them

by Becky McCray

Imagine sitting down with 300 fair and expo professionals, from tiny county operations to enormous state fairs, for a solid hour of open conversation about volunteers. People would share their challenges, questions, and small wins, sparking new ideas for everyone. That's exactly what we did at the IAFE Convention in Denver last December, and the ideas start just like your fair or expo: at the entry booth.

Tell Volunteers Why Their Job Matters

How do you recruit volunteers to take tickets at the entry booth?

Would you apologize for asking? "I need you to take tickets for two hours. It's a boring job, but I really need someone to do it."

Or would you help them understand why

it matters? "I remember when you used to show, and now your little cousin is showing this year. We want to make sure that when families arrive, they can get right in without lines backing up at the gate. That first moment sets the tone for their whole day. I'd love your help making that happen for two hours."

Even if your fair has moved to electronic ticketing or contactless entry, you still have jobs that need humans. That's why you're here.

How you explain the meaning of the job will determine who says yes and whether they ever come back.

Become a Movement People Can Get Behind

"People want to volunteer for organizations that have causes that touch their heart,

that are actively doing good things in their community," chamber volunteer manager Elaina Turpin said. "Don't tell people what you need done; tell them how you make a difference. Then your organization becomes a movement that people can get behind, not just another volunteer opportunity."

Elaina eliminated her organization's year-round committee structure. The audience's reaction when I described this at Convention was half terror, half relief. One person called out: "I love it! Kill the committees!"

In their place, Elaina built what I called "talent pools." That's a group of people you can call on when their specific skill is needed, without any expectation of regular meetings. The key distinction is that you don't call a *meeting* of the talent pool, but you can call on *people* from it.

Don't tell people what you need done; tell them how you make a difference. Then your organization becomes a movement that people can get behind, not just another volunteer opportunity.

A public list of small, specific tasks becomes your best recruiting tool. Not 'we need volunteers.' Instead: 'Could someone power-wash a section or two of the east grandstand this weekend? Here's who to call.' Specific. Small. Doable in an afternoon.

This isn't just a name change. You have to actually change what you expect of people. A committee renamed "talent pool" that still holds monthly meetings is just a committee with a different name.

Entice Volunteers With Activities, Not Committees

This shift away from committees was obvious at a workshop I led in Caldwell, KS, population about 1,000 people. During introductions, people were split along generations.

The older participants introduced themselves by their organizations. One person said, "I'm on the chamber of commerce executive board, I volunteer with the historical society, and I serve on the alumni committee."

The younger participants introduced themselves completely differently. One hesitantly said, "I love to garden. Some friends and I run a book club. Oh, and I have a little free library."

She hesitated because she doesn't see herself as belonging to organizations. She named activities she enjoys.

Asking her to serve on a committee is a mismatch. She's not going to show up to monthly meetings. But would she help spruce up the flower boxes at the fairgrounds or volunteer at the garden show? Yes. Invite her to participate in a specific activity she'd enjoy.

Connect Where Volunteers Gather Today

At the workshop during Convention, June from Maine confirmed that shift. Tra-

ditional civic organizations such as the Lions Club, Kiwanis, and veterans' groups used to be reliable volunteer pipelines. "Their membership has fallen off a cliff," she said. "They are not great, reliable volunteers anymore."

Think about who already gathers around shared interests in your community, whether or not they have a nonprofit designation. The whole audience started listing possibilities for a fair in Maine: Kayak clubs. Hunting groups. Book clubs. The people who play tabletop games together on Thursday nights.

For these interest groups, the pitch isn't just "come help us with the fair." That isn't what they're interested in. The pitch starts by showing how it makes a difference in the community. Then you can say, "come help the community by doing this."

If you can find where people already gather and then connect your fair to something they already care about, you've found a new source of volunteers who'll come in groups. That's easier than recruiting one by one.

Make It Easy for Lots of People To Contribute a Little

Your new pool of individual volunteers now looks like this: lots of different-sized pools.

Picture every potential volunteer in your county standing in groups based on how motivated they are to help. In the "high motivation" pool, you have a small handful of people ready to chair a committee, serve a three-year board term, and attend every monthly meeting. In the "low motivation" pool, there's a crowd of dozens, maybe hun-

Start a "Honey Do" List for Your Fair

A Honey Do List is a public list of small, specific tasks your organization needs completed. Post it where anyone can find it and act on it without joining a committee or attending a meeting.

How To Start:

- Make tasks small and specific: "Power wash the east grandstand section" not "Help with grounds."
- Post it on Facebook, your website, or on a flyer at the coffee shop.
- Have liability concerns? Bring volunteers into your existing committee insurance with a simple form, or request a waiver.
- No follow-up required. If no one does it, quietly find someone else or leave it on the list.

Sample tasks: Paint picnic tables. Winterize the garden boxes. Adopt a flower planter.

This Honey Do List helps you engage new people with small asks.

dreds, who would gladly help young people for an afternoon, fix up one flower box, or spread the word online if asked.

Most volunteer recruitment focuses entirely on that small handful of the most motivated people. We have volunteer intake forms, committee structures, and advisory boards to help us identify and work with those highly motivated people. That feels easier to manage than dividing a job among dozens of people. But having a lot more people helping in tiny ways doesn't have to require a lot of formality.

This is where a public list of small, specific tasks becomes your best recruiting tool. Not "we need volunteers." Instead: "Could someone power-wash a section or two of the east grandstand this weekend? Here's who to call." Specific. Small. Doable in an afternoon.

Check out the sidebar for more on the "Honey Do List" for your fair. It's your way to put out the call and let people recruit themselves.

Camie from the Canyon County Fair in Idaho said this was the one thing she most

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Today's fair kids are often tomorrow's fair volunteers, and they might bring their friends. Photo by Becky McCray.



Become a community movement people can get behind, not just another volunteer opportunity. Photo by Becky McCray.

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wanted to try. They drew 60,000 attendees over four days, but had zero volunteers. The Honey Do List was her practical first step toward adding volunteers.

Kids These Days! They Connect When They Care.

Several fair professionals at the Convention workshop said they struggle to find youth volunteers beyond the usual FFA

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The teens on their Junior Fair Board 'will drag their friends along for different events they're helping out with at the fairgrounds.' Some of their best volunteers have come from those tag-along teens.

Chapters and 4-H kids. The kids who grew up at the fair have an emotional connection to this experience, for better or worse!

But how do you reach young people who don't have that built-in emotional connection to the fair? Like today's adults, young people respond to activities and smaller commitments. They care about making a difference for themselves, their family and friends, and their community. The workshop group had many ideas here, too.

- **Connect young volunteers to future career possibilities.** Young people care about their future, and volunteering can be a path to future employment and college admission. Your fair may be where young people gain experience before they are hired. One professional at the workshop said, "I let them know if they volunteer with us and they do a good job, I am happy to provide them with a letter of recommendation whether it's for employment or college."

- **Let youth travel in pairs and groups.** This is something we've seen in our lives but may not have considered for our volunteers. One person at the workshop said the teens on their Junior Fair Board "will drag their friends along for different events they're helping out with at the fairgrounds." Some of their best volunteers have come from those tag-along teens.

- **Sign off on community service hours.** Many high schools, colleges, and youth groups perform community service hours. One fair that runs during the school year created a list of one-hour after-school tasks that students can choose from, like a Honey Do List for teens. The fair then signs off on their hours. It's become a ready pipeline for them.

- **Teens can be magical with younger kids.** One fair person said she was a bit skeptical, maybe even prejudging, when someone suggested asking the local football team to volunteer. But these teens were great! "They were magical," she reported. "They worked in the kids' areas, and they talked so well to the little kids. They came on time."

Volunteer Recruitment Never Ends

We hit our time limit for that workshop in Denver, but a bunch of people weren't ready to leave. They stayed, and we kept sharing ideas. Some of the best things you've

just read came in those extra 15 minutes.

What were your favorite takeaways from June, Camie, and the other 290+ friends? What's one thing you'll try first? Go ahead and send a quick text to one of your friends or colleagues to kick off your idea.

The conversation continues in the PDF, which includes full workshop notes and stories that didn't fit here. Find them at saveyour.town/IAFE

Becky McCray is a cattle rancher, rural development strategist, and co-founder of SaveYour.Town. She led the "Finding More Volunteers" workshop at the 2025 IAFE Convention in Denver. The full workshop summary — including all audience contributions — is available free at saveyour.town/IAFE. Her book, *The Idea Friendly Guide*, is available wherever books are sold. Invite Becky to your event at beckymccray.com.

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