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### P.A.L.S. Volunteer Retention Project- Final Report

#### **Background**

Poweshiek Animal League Shelter (P.A.L.S.) was officially started in 2004 with a handful of dedicated people who kept the adoptable pets in their homes and promoted them at various local events. At that time, the organization was still fundraising and had not purchased any property. By 2006, P.A.L.S. had raised enough funds and gotten enough donations to purchase property several miles outside of the town of Grinnell, Iowa. They were able to further expand their property in 2007 to include a room for the dog kennels, thanks to a grant they received. P.A.L.S. has never gotten funding from the state or the county, all of the money they receive is from grants and donations.

Throughout its history, P.A.L.S. has always had one mission: “to care for unwanted animals in Poweshiek County, to find permanent and loving homes for them, to respond to animal neglect and cruelty, to educate all on humane treatment of animals, and to prevent overpopulation via spays and neutering.” The non-profit organization has been able to do just that for over 800 animals and counting because of the hard work and dedication of its volunteers. There are three shifts a day (at nine a.m., one p.m., and five p.m.) and each shift ideally consists of three or four volunteers. Each shift also has a shift leader who is more fully trained and therefore the only person who can walk the larger, harder to handle dogs.

A unique characteristic of the shelter, besides its lack of state or county funding, is its no-kill policy. This means that any animal taken in by the shelter cannot be euthanized for lack of

space. The only reasons an animal can be humanely euthanized are either because of an incurable/chronic illness or, in one instance so far, uncontrollable aggression/violence towards other animals and/or people.

P.A.L.S. is having an issue retaining volunteers long-term, as evidenced by its recent loss of a handful of key volunteers. This research aims to better understand why some people quit volunteering, why others continue, and how the organization can improve the volunteering experience at the shelter. Because the shelter is completely volunteer-run, this is a crucial issue which affects the entire organization. Consistency is an important factor in making shelter-life less stressful for the animals, and can best be achieved by the volunteers who feed, water, walk, and administer medications to the animals on a daily basis. As such, it is vital that the organization find people who will continue to volunteer regularly. Consistency is also very important to the volunteers, as fewer people means more responsibilities for each person, therefore making the volunteering experience more stressful.

### **Evaluation Methods**

To begin with, we chose past and current volunteers of P.A.L.S. as our research population. Because our population was relatively small, we were not able to use random sampling methods to select our sample. Instead, we simply emailed all of the people on the contact lists we received from our key informant at P.A.L.S., Ashley Grundler. (Note: We did not include college students in our study, as they were not part of our target population.) Those who responded positively were then sent a follow-up email to arrange a mutually-agreeable time to do an individual semi-structured interview with us, either in person or by phone. Each semi-structured interview consisted of the interviewee being prompted on topics relevant to the

research questions and then being given free rein to discuss the prompts as they saw fit. Some of the interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed, while others were simply written down. All in-person interviews lasted between 45 and 70 minutes, and all phone interviews were between 25 and 50 minutes.

After our data collection was complete, we analyzed and coded the results in a manner similar to the way Nvivo synthesizes data. All similar responses were grouped together and then placed under the relevant category.

A big problem we encountered in the process of our research was not getting as many interviews as we would have liked. This is due in part to issues with coordinating schedules and lack of response from people. There were several times when the interviewees did not show up to their scheduled interviews. Several people we sent emails to never replied to our inquiries.

## Results

Below are the results we compiled from the data we collected during the interviews. We have created a list of the top five general complaints and another list of the top five recommendations provided by the participants, as well as two graphs, one comparing the types of interactions current and past volunteers had the board and the other comparing the types of interactions current and past volunteers had with fellow volunteers.

### Top Five Complaints

1. Lack of structure/no enforcement of rules/no standardized training (13)
2. Disconnect between board and volunteers (12)
3. Not enough quality time with animals (7)
4. Ideas shot down by board/not listened to/no support (5)
5. People intruding on shifts/power dynamic (4)

List 1: The top five general complaints brought up by the participants about the shelter.  
\*Note: Number in parenthesis is number of people who mentioned each complaint.

### Top Five Recommendations from the Volunteers

1. Standardized training/check-ups/retraining (12)
2. Improve communication (9)
3. Feedback (8)
4. Get the board members more involved (8)
5. More quality time with animals (8)

List 2: The top five recommendations offered by the participants to improve the volunteer experience.  
\*Note: Number in parenthesis is number of people who mentioned each recommendation.

All thirteen interviewees mention either lack of structure, no enforcement of rules, or no standardized training as an issue the shelter faces. Ninety-two percent of respondents felt that

there was a feeling of disconnection between the board and volunteers. Nearly fifty-four percent of the volunteers complained about not having enough quality time with the animals. Regarding recommendations the participants had for P.A.L.S., ninety-two percent of them suggested some form of standardized training, check-ups, and/or retraining. About sixty-nine percent of both past and current volunteers felt that P.A.L.S. needs to improve communication.

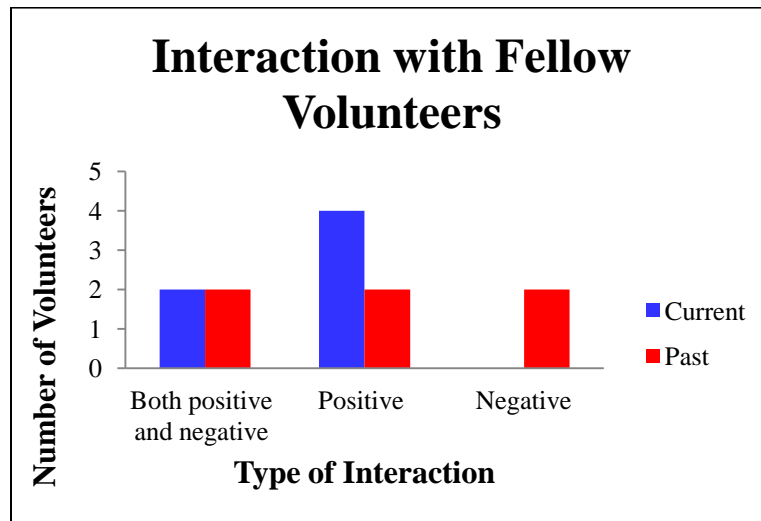


Figure 1: Responses from participants about the types of interactions they had with fellow volunteers. (n=12)

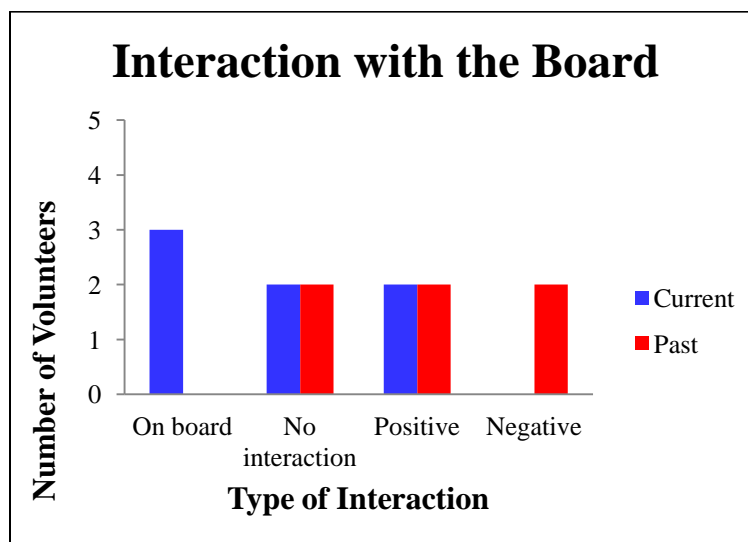


Figure 2: Responses from participants about the types of interactions they had with the board. (n=13)

As you can see from the graphs above, past volunteers were evenly distributed, thirty-three percent either had positive, negative, or both positive and negative interactions with fellow volunteers. Of the six current volunteers that talked about their interactions with fellow volunteers, almost sixty-seven percent of them had positive interactions, and only thirty-three percent had both positive and negative interactions. In the second graph, about twenty-nine percent of current volunteers had either no interactions with the board or positive interactions with the board and none of them had negative interactions. In contrast, thirty-three percent of past volunteers had either negative interactions, positive interactions, or no interactions with the board.

### **Discussion of the Results**

Many of the participants had general complaints concerning the structure of the shelter and cohesion among the volunteers. Around seventy-seven percent of the complaints mentioned in the interviews involved some sort of personality clash with other volunteers, or differential power dynamics between different shifts. For example, several interviewees mentioned issues with other volunteers intruding on their shifts, making the participants feel defensive. In addition, the shelter lacks a clear and consistent structure, causing volunteers to face issues that can be overwhelming at times. Some of the issues that volunteers talked about included negative feedback, lack of communication, and a feeling of disconnection between the board and the volunteers. A couple of the interviewees mentioned times when the board either refused to listen to their ideas or belittled their suggestions. “Your voice won’t be heard unless you’re a part of that power clique (i.e. the board),” said one volunteer. “I felt very disrespected,” added another while referring to the way in which the board treated volunteers’ concerns. Additionally, about fifteen percent of the respondents mentioned having received negative feedback, while many

others had received no feedback at all. For example, a couple of people said that there was an emphasis on what the volunteers were doing incorrectly at the shelter, and no feedback was given on what was done right.

Besides the complaints mentioned above, the participants also provided recommendations for how P.A.L.S. could improve the volunteering experience at the shelter. Approximately ninety-two percent of the interviewees stated that they would appreciate some sort of standardized training, check-ups, and/or retraining. One person stated “I have been working there for four years and I haven’t received any training since I started.” Several others stated that there was no training when they started with the organization. Also, seventy-two percent of the participants talked about increasing the amount of quality time volunteers have with the animals at the shelter. Of particular importance was the mention of a shift to spending more time maintaining the building and less time interacting with the animals. A certain participant stated, “I don’t have any relationships with the new animals because I don’t interact with them as much.” This change was caused by the expansion of the building and the addition of the concrete dog kennels. Finally, some of the volunteers expressed frustration that many of the board members were conspicuously absent from events held by P.A.L.S. For example, one volunteer mentioned that “Half of the community board members don’t even attend events.” As such, a majority of the interviewees said that they would appreciate more involvement from the board members.

Overall, most of the past volunteers stopped going to the shelter because of the negative experiences they had, particularly with the board, and the lack of an organizational structure. “They treated us like employees, and forgot we were volunteering,” said one volunteer while talking about his/her interactions with the board, and the rude tone of the instructions given

during shifts. Also, issues with communication were repeatedly brought up during the interviews, yet another indicator of problems with the dearth of a clear structure at the shelter. Even current volunteers recognized these concerns at the shelter, however they were more willing to overlook them because the positive experiences they had helping the animals find “forever homes” outweighed the negative ones.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The findings suggest that structure is a very important characteristic of a volunteer-run organization. In the course of doing our literature reviews, we found an article that talked about the importance of clarity and structure in retaining volunteers. Organizations that provide their volunteers with clear issues and concrete solution are more likely to be successful (Taylor et al., 2008). These findings are similar to the issues brought up by our interviewees. Consistency in training, and expectations in terms of maintaining the shelter were very important to the volunteers. P.A.L.S. needs to provide a comprehensible organizational structure with standardized procedures and an obvious chain of command. This can be achieved by establishing some form of standardized training, check-ups, and/or retraining to help the volunteers feel prepared for the realities of working at the shelter.

Another important discovery we made was that over fifty percent of the past volunteers had either no interactions or negative interactions with the board at P.A.L.S. This implies that there needs to be more involvement from the board, as well as improving the interactions between the volunteers and the board by being more open to volunteers’ suggestions, and being self-reflective of the ways in which they respond to volunteers’ thoughts and opinions.



In addition to creating a coherent structure and improving interactions with the board, P.A.L.S. needs to strive to produce a welcoming space where volunteers can network with one another about successes and difficulties they are having during their shifts at the shelter, as well as provide emotional support to help prevent burnout among them.

Lastly, the issue of lack of quality time with the animals mentioned by the participants may suggest that some volunteers just starting at P.A.L.S. come in with misconceptions about working in an animal shelter. They might expect working at a shelter to consist of spending most of the time playing with the animals; thus, their expectations differ from the reality of working at a shelter. As such, we would suggest a more thorough orientation and initial training for potential volunteers. There needs to be a clear statement about the realities of working at P.A.L.S., so that volunteers do not end up disappointed because they did not get to spend much time with the animals.

By incorporating all the information provided from this study, P.A.L.S. can enhance volunteer experiences, overall, therefore improving volunteer retention.

### **Acknowledgements**

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