



## **STRATEGIES FOR THE WELL-CONNECTED COMMUNITIES MASTER VOLUNTEER PROGRAM**

This document will lay out strategies for recruitment, training, implementing and sustaining a Master Volunteer Program developed for the Well Connected Communities Initiative (WCCMV). These strategies are rooted in research and best practices distilled from the foundational Arkansas Extension Wellness Ambassador and Texas Health and Wellness Master Volunteer Programs as well as harvestings from the initial implementation of the WCCMV. These harvestings came from:

- Informal feedback from Wave 1 Principal Investigators and WCC Curriculum contacts in the 13 pilot states as the MV program was rolled out
- Feedback from workshop and Ignite sessions at three national Extension conferences (National Health Outreach Conference, National Extension Conference on Volunteerism- 2 sessions, and the National Extension Association for Family and Consumer Science- 2 sessions)
- Site visit to the Lincoln, Nebraska WCC program site and focus group with 3 volunteers
- Virtual focus group with the Idaho WCCMV trainees

### **Strategy Group #1: Guiding Principles**

- Master Volunteers work hand-in-hand with their local Extension Agent so that the MV work is an extension of the educational mission of the grassroots Cooperative Extension Program (CES). Master Volunteers are teachers of research-based information, organizers of major programs to free up Extension staff to expand their programming.
- MVs are working in the health space created by CES and the Wellness Councils of their local communities. They may represent CES in lieu of or in addition to the County Extension staff. If there is no Wellness Council, they may lead the organization of the Council within their local communities as a MV implementation project.
- Youth ages 14 and up are as capable of serving as Master Volunteers as adults. Of paramount importance for the youth MV is the youth-adult partnership (YAP) where youth are mentored and coached by a caring adult who may be the County Extension Agent, an adult MV, their volunteer 4-H leader, or another adult mentor. Because of YAP, the WCCMV is an example of the Positive Youth Development Model (PYD). Youth-Adult Partnerships (YAP) are also not checkbox items from a “to do” list; nor is YAP a program. It is a strategy where youth are treated as equal partners to adults with equal voice at the table.

- There are important distinctions between a volunteer and a MV in terms of recruitment, training, utilization, and retention. This is a scalable model, although an Extension Agent will likely not have a large contingent of MVs.
- Extension Agents must see themselves differently in this process; see MV Framework. Plans of work and curriculum vitae need to be tailored to reflect the addition of Master Volunteers as an extension of professional work, not a replacement. The MV will support, not supplant the local Extension staff.
- Supervisors and leadership at State Extension Offices must recognize and support development of MV as expansion of the Extension Agent's reach.
- To be most successful, WCCMVs need to be recruited, trained and utilized as MVs, not as other Master Volunteers such as Master Gardeners with a health-oriented project.
- Master Volunteers are:
  - Engaged in project planning (as an individual or part of a group)
  - Treated as partners in project planning/projects
  - Allowed autonomy to choose direction and focus of project
  - Provided support (leadership and educational) from local Extension staff
  - Able to be engaged in needs assessment and project identification
- Extension Educators:
  - Treat master volunteers as equal partners.
  - Foster group cohesion and ownership
  - Promote independent thinking
  - Provide support tailored to volunteers' needs
  - Avoid thinking of or treating master volunteers as a back-up Extension educator or Plan B

### **Strategy Group #2: Recruitment**

- Recruitment of MV needs to be done outside the thought box of traditional Extension volunteers. Extension Homemakers, 4-H teen leaders, other Extension volunteers are not the best sources for Master Volunteers. Examples of places for recruitment include: nursing programs especially where a practicum may be required, retired teachers or retired school staff such as a lunch room lady, colleges with a wellness office or student health organization, high school or college student health organizations, student teachers, fraternities or sororities with a service or health theme, hospital and clinic volunteers looking for a deeper experience, etc.
- Use non-traditional themes in volunteer recruitment such as:
  - Improve your own health while leading/helping others
  - Link MV to the land-grant university with the MV seen as an equal partner; affiliation with the land-grant university (LGU) is important to the MV.
- Have patience and invest time in relationship-building.
- **Embrace the uncertainty of the community development process.** Extension staff should think of themselves as community development specialists rather than what they usually do.
- This is not a “check the box and they will appear” process. Also, this is not a “numbers” game; professional Extension staff may have only a handful of MVs. The same is true for cultivating Youth-Adult Partnerships.

- Be open-minded about the volunteers and where they come from.
- Background checks must be completed according to the protocol established by the respective LGUs.
- MVs may be easier to develop in communities without existing health infrastructure such as a Community Wellness Council rather than to try to superimpose them on a well-developed community council already passionate about addressing an issue. In Wave 1, this would be easier in a “Planner” Community than an “Innovator” Community to embrace either MVs or youth.
- Challenges:
  - Prior experience with volunteer engagement
  - Educator as “expert upfront” versus facilitator and co-learner
  - Supervisor attitude with educator performance evaluation
  - Within Extension Culture:
    - Volunteer leadership and management experience
    - Educators may feel threatened
    - Perceived value of volunteers versus burden of volunteer management
    - Time!
  - In “real” life:
    - Finding the “right” volunteer (don’t fall into this trap)
    - Recruiting
    - Volunteers’ limited time
    - Sustained engagement beyond 40-hour give-back commitment

### **Strategy Group #3: Training**

- This is a “Loose-Tight” training program. National leadership has provided 15 foundational modules which all MV are expected to complete as 40% of their training. The other 60% is provided by the LGUs according to state health goals and needs, community issues, needs assessments, etc. This is the “loose” aspect.
- Under the “tight” aspects of the program, there are 40 hours on training expected with 40 hours of give-back volunteering.
- Training does not all have to come from Extension; a training meeting within the community, continuing education course, lecture by a reputable expert, online course, etc. may included at the discretion of the County Extension Agent/LGU.
- Deeper dives into one of the foundational modules may also be part of the state training. For example, maybe YAP is foreign to the Community Wellness Council and more work is needed for that topic.
- Training may include practice hands-on work: maybe a trial practice of a teaching program to be given by the MV with the local Extension Agent critiquing can be included.
- A standard Master Volunteer training may “kick off” the training no matter what specific topic the volunteer may wish to address during their service. Perhaps orientation to the concept of Master Volunteers could encompass Master Gardeners, Master Food Preservers, WCCMV, etc. at one session.
- Leverage existing resources when designing the LGU portion of the training program.
- Examples of how a training program might look:

- Texas Master Wellness Volunteers (issue: Improved Nutrition)
  - Overview, Diversity, Public Speaking, etc.-----7 hours
  - Nutrition-----8 hours
  - Food safety-----5 hours
  - Health-----10 hours
  - Opportunities for Additional Learning-----10 hours
- Arkansas Extension Wellness Ambassadors (topic: Physical Activity)
  - Food & Nutrition-----4.5 hours
  - Physical Activity-----8.5 hours
  - General Health, Chronic Disease, Mental Health-----8 Hours
  - Project Planning Process, Extension Background-----7 hours
  - Program Evaluation-----4 hours
  - Take Home Activities-----8 hours
- Training structures may include online, face-to-face, or blended:
- Arkansas uses a blend of multi-county clusters, 32 hours face-to-face with group project planning time for 5 consecutive days
- Texas uses 60% online, single or multi-county clusters, meeting over 5 weeks. Statewide training launched 2018 very successful.

#### **Strategy Group #4: Implementation**

Official volunteer give “back-back” hours are also “loose-tight”. “Tight” protocol is for the 40 hours; what is counted as volunteering is subject to state and local discretion (“Loose”).

- LGUs are encouraged to think broadly about acceptable volunteering which may include:
  - Time spent planning and organizing a demonstration or program, such as phone calls to recruit attendees or to secure a meeting place
  - Time spent shopping if supplies are needed
  - Drive time to the program site
  - Set-up and clean-up time
  - If an evaluation was done, analysis of results
  - Attendance at a community meeting related to the chosen health issue especially if representing CES
- Think about providing a buffet-style selection of projects for a volunteer to perform.
  - Examples: Community gardens, intergenerational gardening programs, “Grow A Row” for donation projects, SNAP-ED support; Food pantries, healthy cooking schools
  - Other examples: Caregiver Support Groups, Worksite Wellness Programs (smoking cessation, worksite exercise programs)
  - How about organizing health fairs, one-on-one health mentoring, a run for City Council to promote health policies and practices (PSE work)?
- **Again, think outside the box.**

#### **Strategy Group #5: Sustainability**

- Continuing education and opportunities for growth are essential to retaining the individual volunteer.
- Continuous recruitment as opportunity arises is essential to keeping a cadre of volunteers. This is a way of working, not a “box to be checked off”.
- If the MV is seen as an ongoing process of personal development and not as a back-up or Plan B for the presence of an Extension Agent, retention will be enhanced.

**Strategy Group #6: Recognition** (This is also part of sustainability)

- Affiliation with a university is important, especially for people with more limited educational opportunities. The name badge upon completion of training and give-back must include the name of the LGU.
- In the “Loose-Tight” framework, LGUs may institute their own form of recognition. Traditional forms of recognition such as a dinner, certificates, etc. are valuable as well. The name badge with the university logo worked well for Arkansas and Texas. Arkansas used white badges with red lettering for new Extension Wellness Ambassadors. Those who went beyond year 1 received red background with white lettering to signify seasoned volunteers.

**Strategy Group #7: Comparison with Other Master CES Programs**

It is vital that WCC MV associate their role and volunteer identify with WCC. Master Gardeners are known throughout the country for their expertise and extensive work to help others learn to garden and for community beautification projects. They often collaborate with other Extension programs to address issues such as food insecurity through community gardens or work with Junior Master Gardeners. Key to successful scaling of Master Gardeners has been time. This volunteer program, in existence for twenty-five years, has had time to disseminate, evolve, and institutionalize through the land-grant system across the country. While Master Gardeners share a similar mission to WCC MV, it was observed in Wave 1 that cross-training Master Gardeners in WCC MV core health content with an expectation they will then operate as Master Health Volunteers does not work well. Volunteers tended to view WCC MV as ancillary to their primary role as a Master Gardener. This aspect of role and program identity hinders growth of WCC MV.

Comparisons between WCCMV and Master Gardeners that may aid states in planning collaboration include:

- Specified training hours and give-back hours. Forty hours of training and 40 volunteer service hours seems prevalent.
- Extensive and on-going training.
- Close identification between the master volunteers and the CES with evidence and research-based training.
- Teaching is the forte of both.
- At present, both have a hub of leadership. For Master Gardeners, it is the state’s Extension organization/agency operated through the land grant university. The WCC MV

is currently operated through National 4-H Council in partnership with Extension/land grants.

- The passion for health and productivity of plants is key for Master Gardeners in their work. Health and wellness master volunteers are passionate about helping others pursue healthy and productive lives.
- Both programs have a “loose-tight” configuration especially in training topics, implementation protocol and evaluation.
- There is opportunity for both kinds of master volunteers to work with WCC, although the Master Gardener may not necessarily be considered a “master volunteer” for WCC as currently conceptualized. For example, if the issue is food access, and a community garden is planted, the Master Gardener could be the expert on planning, planting and harvesting the vegetables. In partnership, the WCC Master Volunteer could organize volunteers to work under direction of the Master Gardener; secure food safe storage for the produce; coordinate community-focused marketing efforts; and educate the patrons of the food bank, SNAP program, etc. on how to utilize the fresh produce. Other master volunteer programs may also be involved as partners. For example, the WCCMV could engage a Master Food Preserver or Master Food Volunteer to work with the produce recipients on how to preserve excess produce for later consumption.