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3R- Reach, Recruit, Reform: Working with the Grand Rapids community to meet the volunteer needs of the Heartside Gleaning Initiative

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Abstract:

The purpose of this project is to address the volunteer needs of the Heartside Gleaning Initiative, a nonprofit organization founded by Grand Valley State University professor Lisa Sisson. The mission of the Heartside Gleaning Initiative is to “empower the Heartside community to become healthier through nutrition education and improving accessibility of healthy foods” (Heartside, 2014). Members of the Heartside Gleaning Initiative are currently working to give people living in the Heartside community of Grand Rapids access to fresh produce. Volunteers glean the produce from local farmers at the Fulton Street Farmers Market and then deliver it to shelters in the Heartside neighborhood. This work is also a part of a larger goal to fight the national issue of food insecurity, which affects millions of people living in the United States.

For this project, our group chose to focus on volunteer recruitment. Volunteers are the backbone of the Heartside Gleaning Initiative and a necessary component for the work being done. We have begun to work with several Grand Rapids schools and local churches in the Heartside neighborhood to generate awareness about the initiative and to try and fill this need for volunteers. The organization specifically needs a core group of four to five volunteers who can consistently work with the initiative. Though we have generated interest among community members to volunteer for a weekend, we struggled to establish this core group of leaders. This proved to be our biggest challenge with the project, and finding a group of leaders will continue to be a task for the initiative in the future, though we have several suggestions that may help their efforts.

The final goal for this project was to provide the Heartside Gleaning Initiative with recruitment materials. We recreated a pamphlet for the organization to give to potential volunteers. It includes information about the goals and the mission of the organization and contact information. It can be used to generate awareness and knowledge about the Heartside Gleaning Initiative. We also provided the organization with a list of the local churches and schools with interested members. We hope the initiative will be able to use these materials to continue to recruit a stable group of volunteers.

Introduction:

Access to food continues to be a problem for millions of people in the United States. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, 17.5 million households were food insecure at various times during 2013. This means they were uncertain of having, or unable to get, enough food for every member of their household (USDA, 2014). This food issue affects cities across the nation, including Grand Rapids, Michigan.

According to the Grand Rapids Coalition to End Homelessness, over 4,000 people are homeless in the city, and over 1,500 are children (Coalition, 2014). In Grand Rapids there are several shelters that provide shelter, food and health services to these people in need. Mel Trotter Ministries had an average of 236 people every night from January 1 to July 31 and served 117,234 meals. In 2013, their food pantry served 4,741 families (Mel Trotter, 2014). Dégagé Ministries offers several programs such as their dining room and hygiene facilities. Each day, Dégagé serves between 400 to 500 people (Dégagé, 2014). These shelters aren't the only organizations that provide food and services to the community though.

The Heartside Gleaning Initiative works to collect and distribute healthy food to residents in the Heartside neighborhood, located in downtown Grand Rapids. Members of this community have limited access to, and knowledge of, healthier foods (Heartside, 2014). The initiative has partnered with the Fulton Street Farmers Market and gleans fresh produce and herbs from several of the vendors each Saturday after the market closes. This food is then taken to shelters such as Mel Trotter and Dégagé to be used in their kitchens and distributed to Heartside community members.

Like many nonprofit organizations, the Heartside Gleaning Initiative operates on a volunteer basis. Throughout the summer and fall, volunteers are needed every Saturday to collect the donations from vendors at the farmers market and to transport the produce to the shelters. In the future, the initiative would also like volunteers to be able to host short cooking classes or workshops to show people different recipes using the produce. Training new volunteers each week is time consuming. To have a small, consistent group able to volunteer every week, would decrease the amount of time needed to train volunteers, and it would also allow the volunteers to create meaningful relationships with members of the Heartside Gleaning Initiative and the Heartside neighborhood. However, recruiting a stable group of volunteers has also been difficult for the initiative. This is why our group chose to focus our efforts and research on recruitment.

Action Plan:

The initiative is in need of volunteers from June through October. More consistency, experience and stability among the volunteers is needed in order to create leaders for the group. A team of four to five people who can volunteer at least one to two times per month to lead and organize the other volunteers would alleviate the strain on current volunteers. These group leaders would also need to be able to drive vans of food and volunteers from the farmers markets to the shelters. A core group of approximately 15 people total each weekend to help collect food from the markets and deliver it would be ideal (Sisson, 2014).

Our group focused our efforts on addressing this need and decided to split up the work into two main categories: (1) community outreach and (2) material development. The community outreach

portion involved contacting local schools, youth groups and churches to discuss volunteer opportunities with the Heartside Gleaning Initiative. Material development included creating an informational pamphlet that can be distributed to possible participants.

Process:

Without volunteers many nonprofit organizations could not provide their services. This would force either the government sector to provide these services, or society would have to live without them (Wymer, Riecken, and Yavas 1996). This being said, the Heartside Gleaning Initiative provides an important service to the community and needs to be able to maintain a stable level of volunteers.

Recruiting volunteers can be done either directly or indirectly. Direct volunteer recruitment activities are done to appeal to prospective volunteers. These activities may include advertisements, publicity events, public speaking engagements or person-to-person recruitment. Indirect recruitment activities are done by other organizations, such as a volunteer referral center, which maintain close relationships with nonprofit organizations and know their specific needs. These centers encourage community volunteering and are able to connect specific groups or individuals with local nonprofit organizations based on their needs (Wymer and Starnes, 2001).

Our group chose to use direct volunteer recruitment activities and started by contacting schools and youth groups in the Grand Rapids area. These groups included Grand Rapids University Prep Academy, Wellspring Preparatory High School, St. Anthony of Padua and the Remembrance Reformed Church. Each expressed interest in the Heartside Gleaning Initiative and can be contacted in the future if groups of volunteers are needed. We

chose to first contact schools and youth groups based on our research. Many high schools encourage service learning, and some offer credit or recognition for volunteer service in non-profit organizations. Other groups such as fraternities, Boy Scouts and local Lions Clubs are also good sources of volunteers (Wymer, 1997).

In an effort to recruit a core group of volunteers, our group reached out to two churches located in the Heartside community, LaGrave Avenue Christian Reform and the Westminster Presbyterian Church. Members of both of these churches have a history of volunteering with various organizations in the surrounding area, according to Ruth Stegeman, the Director of Community Engagement Director at GVSU (Stegeman, 2014). We are currently still discussing volunteer opportunities with both churches and will be leaving the informational pamphlets at each location.

Our research also shows that volunteer recruitment is aided by meaningful job assignments. Some jobs require low-level skills such as typing or stuffing envelopes. Other jobs require knowledge in a specific field. Volunteers want to know what will be expected of them and to be placed in appropriate positions. This makes the experience more meaningful to them. Designing appropriate volunteer jobs precedes recruitment for this reason, and having a list of the jobs is a beneficial tool to be able to hand to potential volunteers (Wymer, 1997). The Heartside Gleaning Initiative has already developed a list of job descriptions, which should be taken with recruiters in the future and given to potential volunteers.

Results:

Our group created an informational pamphlet to distribute to interested community members and volunteers (see

Appendix A). The pamphlet describes the mission, goals and needs of the Heartside Gleaning Initiative. The portable document format can be published on the initiative's website and printed copies can be handed out in the community. This allows volunteers to get all of the information they will need from one location. Also, the pamphlet can be accessed at anytime and distributed via email since it is in a PDF format.

While working on this project, our group encountered several challenges. We didn't start this project with a clear vision of what we wanted to accomplish and took a while to develop our revised goals. In turn, this limited the amount of time we had to work, and we had to change our goals several times throughout the semester. Our starting goal was to provide the Heartside Gleaning Initiative with enough volunteers for the entire summer 2015 season. However, we soon realized this was unrealistic and our goal began to evolve. We eventually decided that we wanted to create awareness within the Grand Rapids community about volunteer opportunities with the initiative.

As mentioned, our group has struggled to get people to commit to volunteering for the Heartside Gleaning Initiative. While we have generated interest in the organization, we were not able to recruit a core group of volunteers.

Future Considerations:

We recommend that the Heartside Gleaning Initiative stay in contact with the churches and schools that our group has already contacted. This can be done through a simple email reminder describing the available volunteer opportunities. Future students or others pursuing this work could also contact the resident assistants (RA) at the Winter and Secchia Halls. These dormitories are owned by GVSU and the

RAs are looking for volunteer opportunities for their residents in the Grand Rapids area.

Another idea is to set up a booth during the volunteer and internship fair hosted by GVSU's Community Service Learning Center each fall. As mentioned above, volunteers can be recruited indirectly through a volunteer referral center. GVSU's Community Service Learning Center is an example of this, and it is a good resource for connecting nonprofits with potential volunteers. Their fair helps connect students with agencies in Grand Rapids and only costs the organizations \$10 to participate (CSLC, 2014). Both of these suggestions may help the Heartside Gleaning Initiative to find semester or yearlong volunteers.

It could also be helpful to contact Farm Fresh RI, a nonprofit organization located in Rhode Island that provides a similar service, but on a larger scale. On Saturdays, the organization gathers extra produce from a farmers market. The produce is stored over the weekend at their warehouse and on Tuesdays and Thursdays it is delivered to multiple food pantries. Currently, Farm Fresh RI is serving 10 food pantries throughout the state (Farm to Fresh, 2014). This organization will likely have tips on how to recruit volunteers and expand the services and reach of the Heartside Gleaning Initiative.

Finally, the farmers at the Fulton Street Farmers Market could also be a good resource. On Saturday mornings before market, someone could drop off a stack of the informational pamphlets with any of the farmers willing to pass them out throughout the day. This would be an easy and very likely effective way to recruit people who already have an interest in the Farmers Market and who may have seen Heartside Gleaning Initiative volunteers during previous visits.

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Appendix A:

<h3>Find out why</h3> <p>Some estimates indicate that up to 40 percent of America's entire food supply goes to waste.</p> <p>Each year, well over 100 billion pounds of food are thrown away in this country.</p> <p>At the same time there are over 49 million people who are at risk of going hungry.</p> <h3>In Heartside...</h3> <p>Approximately 80 percent of the population is food insecure.</p> <p>45 percent of the population lives below the poverty line with 76 percent of 18-64 year olds living in poverty.</p>	<h3>Contact us</h3> <p>heartsidegleaning.weebly.com heartsidegleaning@gmail.com</p> <h3>Supported by...</h3> <p>Fulton Street Farmers Market Grand Rapids Downtown Market Arena District</p>   <h2>DOWNTOWN MARKET GRAND RAPIDS</h2>	<h1>HEARTSIDE GLEANING INITIATIVE</h1> <p>For a healthier Heartside community</p>
<h3>Our mission</h3> <p>We find that there is limited access to healthy food in the Heartside neighborhood. Members of the HGI came together to empower the community to develop food systems that can redirect, or glean, unused healthy food to residents in need.</p> <h3>Our goals...</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We will work local farmers markets, businesses, nonprofits and community members to collect and distribute produce that would otherwise be wasted. ● We will educate community members on the importance of healthy eating and show them the tools to prepare their own nutritious meals. 	<h3>Locate us</h3> <p>The Heartside neighborhood encompasses one of the central districts in the downtown Grand Rapids area. Stretching east for several blocks along the Grand River from Wealthy St. to Fulton.</p> <p>Heartside contains a diverse collection of homes, parks, businesses, buildings and commercial/ industrial space. Many community members are in need of social services such as access to and knowledge of healthier foods.</p>	<h3>Get involved</h3> <p>We are seeking volunteers, food donations and materials that will help the initiative improve the lives of our neighbors.</p> <h3>Our needs...</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fund development: Assist with raising funds and grant applications ● Outreach: Contact local businesses and markets to establish a network of donors ● Collect and distribute: Help the food collection and distribution process