

A Case for Volunteer Management in Early Childhood Development: Community Engagement as a Cornerstone to Family Building Blocks' Success

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Early childhood education advocates are keenly aware of three things. **FIRST:** The years between 0 and 5 are crucial for nurturing the cognitive, emotional, and social skills that lay the foundation for success in school and in life. **SECOND:** Forty percent of children born in the State of Oregon experience risk factors (physical, environmental, social, or developmental) that impede their natural ability to be ready to learn upon school entry. **THIRD:** An engaged community creates the groundswell of support for public and private investment in early childhood development.

Volunteerism can become the means through which agencies gain able assistance while building awareness for the needs of our vulnerable children. With effective use of unpaid staff, agencies can:

- Improve outcomes with children by lowering child-to-adult ratios in classrooms, delivering enrichment activities, and providing consistent relationships with caring adults
- Improve outcomes with parents through education and support services
- Offer programs that would not be possible without volunteers
- Reduce administrative expenses
- Expand private sources of funding
- Heighten community involvement through public speaking, word of mouth, and social networking



High impact volunteerism doesn't just happen. It requires a financial outlay for dedicated volunteer coordination, an investment in staff time and energy, and buy-in at all levels of the agency. Salem's Family Building Blocks (FBB) gladly makes this commitment. In 2012, their investment in professional volunteer management produced significant economic benefit. The associated impact on children, families, staff, volunteers, and the community is priceless.

This paper provides a detailed accounting of FBB's volunteer contributions, thereby demonstrating what's possible when unpaid staff become part of an organization's DNA.

An Introduction to Family Building Blocks

FBB breaks the cycle of intergenerational abuse and neglect by providing services for high-risk families with children from birth to five years old. In 2012, 655 families and 1,154 children in Polk and Marion counties received services that included home visits, respite care, therapeutic classrooms, parent-child interaction groups, and referrals to community resources. Ninety-nine percent of children in FBB's abuse prevention programs are able to live safely with their parents.

Volunteers have been a vital force in FBB's service delivery since its inception in 1997. The inaugural Board of Directors and Executive Director served as the agency's first volunteer coordinators. They engaged civic leaders, business people, law enforcement officers, and others in fundraising, family support, advocacy, and administration. Visible community support lent credibility to the organization and made possible a successful capital campaign in 1999. The campaign manager subsequently served as the first paid Director of Volunteer Services.



With 620 individuals providing over 20,000 hours of service annually, volunteerism is embedded in the organizational culture. Volunteers leverage the agency's \$4.1 million operating budget by providing vital services in the following areas:

Therapeutic Classrooms
Academic Internships
Service Learning

Administrative Support
Work Crews

Reruns for Kids
FBB Auxiliary
Fundraising Events

Therapeutic Classroom Support

FBB's infant, toddler, and preschool programs help young children develop cognitive, emotional, and social skills to prepare them for success in school and in life. When committed volunteers join trained staff in serving young children:

- Children get extra help as they adjust to a classroom environment in which they must learn to pay attention, carry out tasks, and interact with others cooperatively.
- Teachers have the flexibility to address discipline problems and other special needs while their assistants support the classroom routine.
- Children receive individualized attention that intensifies their learning experience and delivers valuable feedback and encouragement.
- Children have access to enrichment activities – e.g., problem-solving, art, music, gardening – that captivate their imaginations while continuing the work on core academic and behavioral competencies.
- Teachers gain able assistance with classroom set-up, snack time, and clean up. They also profit from the additional insights into their students' developmental growth.
- Children establish relationships with compassionate adults who instill confidence and affirm each child's worth and potential.

Volunteers support the classroom experience by serving as van drivers and “bus buddies” to transport children safely to and from school while extending the learning experience. Others assist with community outreach to identify families in need of support, or connect periodically with those on the waiting list. They listen attentively to each person's needs and circumstances, record key information, and provide referrals to community resources where appropriate.

In 2012, volunteers provided 8,687 hours of classroom and related support. At the prevailing market rate for early childhood classroom assistants (\$13.40/hour), their service carries a valuation of \$116,406. Of this amount, FBB was able to allocate \$25,499 toward a matching fund requirement for its Early Head Start (EHS) federal grant.

Academic Internships

Thanks to a dedicated collective of researchers, educators can draw upon a body of best practices that help children from all walks of life develop solid foundations for later learning. These instructional guideposts are embedded in college and university curricula for aspiring teachers. “Hands on” experience helps the academic training take flight.

FBB’s Board of Directors is committed to nurturing the next generation of early childhood educator and human service professionals. Over 100 students from Chemeketa Community College, Corban University, Linfield University, Oregon State University, Portland State, Tulane University, Western Oregon University, Willamette University, and the University of Oregon, have served as interns over the past 5 years. Twenty have returned as full-time members of FBB’s paid staff.

FBB interns provide direct service to children and families as well as indirect support through program administration, event planning, and special projects. In 2012, their 4,898 hours of service carries a \$65,633 valuation of which \$10,800 was applied toward the EHS matching fund requirement. The interns walked away with concrete skills directly related to their field of study as well as professional contacts for referrals and letters of recommendation. They also gained an appreciation for career opportunities in the social services sector.



Service Learning

Service learning provides a way for high school students to gain valuable work experience while contributing to the community and (*hopefully*) making a habit of volunteering. Students aged 16 and older work with the High School Intern Coordinator and FBB staff to provide office support, sort and store food and clothing, coordinate field trips and events, assist with holiday giving programs, build awareness through social networking, and work on special projects. At minimum wage, their 387 hours of service in 2012 is valued at \$3,406.

The seeds that FBB plants with teen leaders may bear fruit for years to come. According to a March 2010 national survey of 1,526 self-reported donors,¹ 52% of Millennials, 32% of Gen Xers, and 24% of Boomers first learned about the organizations to which they provide financial support in childhood.

¹ “The Next Generation of American Giving,” March 2010 | *Convio, Edge Research, and Sea Changes Strategies*

Administrative Support

The care and feeding of a vibrant early childhood development program takes a lot of behind-the-scenes support. A dedicated core of volunteers greets visitors, volunteers, and families and assists with front office work, including but not limited to data entry, scheduling, filing, shredding, and answering phones. They interact with children and parents (caregivers) during pick-up and drop-off. And they receive, record, and inventory donations of food and clothing.

If FBB were to replace its unpaid support team with minimum wage workers, it would require a \$10,630 outlay for their 1,208 hours of assistance in 2012.

Work Crews

Twenty-one volunteer work crews provided episodic support in construction, landscaping, painting, office work, sorting/tagging clothes, and other projects in 2012. At least half of their 570 hours would have had to be hired out, some at rates that far exceed minimum wage. As such, using the minimum wage against the total hours returns a conservative valuation of \$5,016.



Work crews do more than provide valued service for FBB. Teams from PGE, Nordstrom, Chase Bank, Umpqua Bank, Country Financial, KeyBank, and Century Link Pioneers tied their volunteer contributions to corporate sponsorships that provided direct support to FBB and/or defrayed expenses for major fundraising events.

Reruns for Kids



FBB owns and operates Reruns for Kids, an award-winning² retail outlet that sells lightly used children's clothing, furnishings (cribs, strollers, car seats, etc.), and toys. In addition to being a decidedly "green" enterprise, Reruns gives parents an affordable means to attend to their children's needs while raising money and awareness to support FBB. A full-time manager provides oversight of an all-volunteer staff. Collectively, they contributed \$9,157 in 2012 net earnings and provided inventory for FBB's clothes closet, a complimentary family support resource.

² 2012 Silver Medal for Best Mid-Valley Children's Clothing Store

FBB Auxiliary

The Auxiliary is a “go to” group of committed individuals who support FBB’s mission and work. They deliver homemade treats to staff meetings, provide food for volunteer training sessions, staff events, and throw an annual party for FBB employees. They supply roughly \$2,000 worth of in-kind donations (diapers, food, school supplies).

The Auxiliary raises \$5,000 annually through the Woodburn Company Stores Shopping Extravaganza. They use these funds to provide grants to FBB families. Applicants learn to write grant proposals that describe and justify the requested funds. Past recipients have been able to pay past-due utility bills to stabilize the family home, finance business start-ups, attend to home and auto repair, and purchase school books and supplies, medications, specialty shoes, and emergency food rations. Recipients report on outcomes and write formal thank you letters when their objectives have been achieved.

Fundraising Events

By far the largest financial contribution related to volunteerism comes from three major fundraising events:

- Fall Dream Builders Luncheon for 800+ guests
- Spring Celebration Luncheon for 500+ guests
- Uncorked Wine Auction for 400+ guests

With staff oversight and support, volunteer committees assume responsibility for event planning, marketing, food/beverages, centerpieces/décor, corporate sponsorships, auction packages, audience development, and event staffing. The three events contributed \$590,913 in net revenue in 2012.



The volunteer corps and their network of connections provide the engine that drives community awareness, support, and attendance at these events. They contribute financially through cash donations and auction bids. Their participation in the planning processes cements their commitment to FBB. Moreover, their proximity to FBB is far easier on staff than hiring professional event planners from Portland or Seattle.

Volunteerism Makes Dollars... and Sense

Although volunteers do not charge for their time, talents, and connections, they are not “free.” The organization invests roughly **\$100,000** annually to attract the right individuals to the program, provide training and support to ensure their success, cultivate relationships, monitor performance/outcomes, and express gratitude for services.

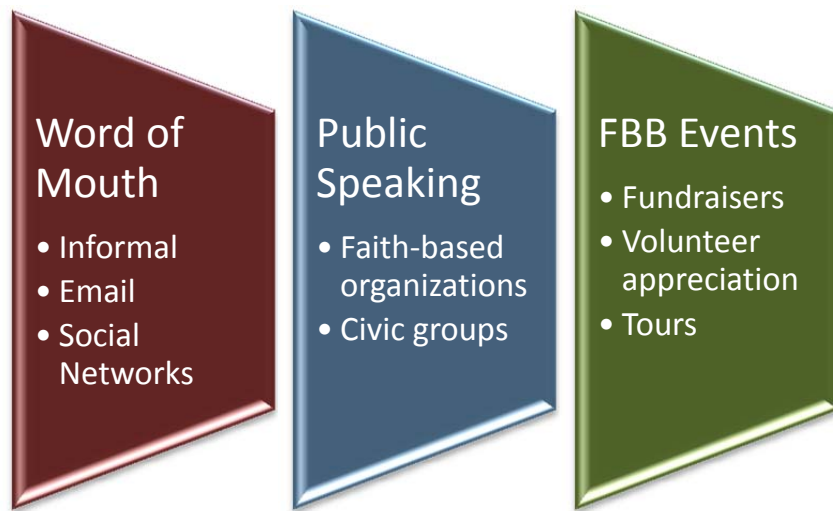
While there is room for debate on valuations attributed to each of the aforementioned volunteer initiatives, the weight of evidence suggests that the financial benefits of fielding a professional volunteer management program at FBB far exceed the costs.

Therapeutic Classroom	\$116,406
Academic Internships	\$65,633
Service Learning	\$3,406
Administrative Support	\$10,630
Work Crews	\$5,016
Reruns for Kids	\$9,157
FBB Auxiliary	\$7,000
FBB Events	\$590,913



As noted previously, volunteers are an important source of financial support. They raise their paddles at the wine auction, tender checks at luncheons, support holiday fund drives, and provide discounts on good and services. Thirty-six percent of FBB’s volunteers are donors³; many of FBB’s “major asks” tie to volunteer engagement.

Through volunteerism, a group of community activists gain an appreciation for the needs of high-risk children and their families and the impact that the Center has on their lives. They become the means through which others learn about FBB and get involved.



The Call to Action

The most important work to be done in communities in the next 15-20 years is early childhood development. With 40% of our children at risk of entering kindergarten unprepared, we need to field evidence-based interventions with children and families to give them the best chance for success.

³ According to an October 2009 survey of 1,005 respondents, people who volunteered in the preceding 12 months donated ten times more to charity than non-volunteers. Two-thirds of the donor-volunteers provided financial contributions to charities at which they’d volunteered. [Source: Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund]

Broad-based community activism helps provide the impetus for federal and state funding and rallies support from foundations, corporations, and individuals. Volunteerism is a mission critical means through which agencies receive sustenance while igniting the passion of its participants. Passion drives activism.

FBB demonstrates that an organization with vision, commitment, and professional volunteer management can reap an attractive return on their cash and human resource investment in community engagement. If every early childhood development agency instituted a vibrant volunteer management program tailored to its programs and scale of operation, one can only imagine the ripple effect it would produce in our communities.

Boomers and Babies is a project of The Oregon Community Foundation (OCF). This cross-generational program supports efforts by early childhood organizations to engage Baby Boomer volunteers in activities that are known to contribute to school readiness. Principal funding for the project comes from The Atlantic Philanthropies, with additional support from the PGE Foundation, Knowledge Universe, the Juan Young Trust, the United Way of the Columbia-Willamette, and several OCF Donor Advised Funds.