



Lessons Learned on Using Volunteer Docents to Lead Programming

Renée Fitzsimons is the Program Manager for Docents, Interpretation, and Environmental education at Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (MROSD). In this feature Renée sheds light on Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District's dedicated team of volunteer docents that are providing high quality HPHP programming that is relatively low in cost and community led.

Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District first began its volunteer docent program in 1977. This program began because of an interest from the general public to have access to and learn more about the land that was being conserved. When it was first established, the docent program consisted of leading hikes and walks that included historical interpretation, natural interpretation, and providing guided access to the District's preserves. Today, the District calls these volunteers "Outdoor Activity Docents" who provide a wide range of interpretive activities in 24 of the 26 preserves within the District. In addition to the Outdoor Activity Docents, Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District has two other docent programs— Outdoor Education Leaders who work with school field trips, and Nature Center Hosts who staff the Daniels Nature Center.

Within the Outdoor Activity Docent program, volunteers come from many different walks of life, professions, and usually range between 40-50 years in age. Docents for this program are recruited through many different avenues, but the most popular forms are through word of mouth, participation on a guided activity, and through the District website. For the other two docent programs, recruitment is more difficult because their programs have many more restrictive elements such as learning to administer curriculum aligned content, not frequently being outside on the trails, and being available either on weekdays or at fixed times on the weekend.

Like many agencies, HPHP values are already embedded within MROSD's existing programs. MROSD's Outdoor Activity Docents regularly lead low-to- moderately paced walks and hikes through their preserves. These walks frequently focus on wellness, have a strong interpretational component, and are open to the community. MROSD's process for turning docent led programs into HPHP branded activities is not only low cost, but also unique in the sense that each activity is developed and led solely by Outdoor Activity Docents. Within this process MROSD informs docents about the HPHP: Bay Area initiative, and provides them with resources about it—largely sourced from hphpbayarea.org. Once docents create their programs, Renée and her staff then identify and label programs as HPHP if they fit the criteria of being family friendly, less than four miles in duration, and are at an introductory –to-moderate pace.

When speaking about the challenges that she has encountered using docents to develop and lead outdoor activities, Renée mentions how the program model used at the District does not allow her and her staff to have primary control over the types of programming that docents develop. Renée mentions how:

The program model we use doesn't allow us to tell docents what they have to do as the activities they develop and provide are "theirs" [and] not ours essentially. Our interpretation and environmental education programs are all delivered and provided by volunteer docents... The fact that all our program delivery happens via docents speaks heaps to the amazing amount of trust and respect that the programs are based on. I have phenomenal docents.

As noted by Renée's statement, the success of this model is largely due to a well-coordinated and dedicated group of volunteers. When asked how she thinks that MROSD's docents can grow in the work that they are doing, Renée speaks about how docents could benefit from training from the collaborative on how to establish connections and relationships with health care providers. She states:

The District could really benefit in developing other HPHP program elements with more support from the HPHP collaborative – partnerships and especially the collaborative's effort and guidance/knowledge to establish the connections to health care providers and medical community. As parks and open space land managers and passive recreation providers that is not our area of comfort, understanding, or communication skill per se.

At its core the model of implementation at MROSD is successful not only because there is a dedicated network of volunteer docents and managing staff, but also because community members via the docents are able to create programming that reflects the needs, cultures, and interests of the general public; this in addition to using an implementation strategy that is relatively low in cost. To learn more about Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District and their programs visit the program page.