Courts across the country have been hit in recent years with shrinking budgets, as well as demands for increased monetary accountability and productivity. As a result, many in the profession are beginning to look at creative ways of stretching those resources. The use of volunteers to augment court-provided services is one non-traditional alternative often being considered. Through careful planning, volunteer services can be a significant resource for courts to draw upon. The use of volunteers, however, often comes with its own price tag. Therefore, careful planning and wise decision-making are crucial to developing a successful volunteer program.

Originally completed in 1998, this project explored the factors involved in developing a successful court volunteer program. Reviewing literature in the field–both from the standpoint of using volunteers in courts and from the use of volunteers in public organizations generally–the project suggested a checklist of items to be considered when developing a court volunteer program. Addressing the issue from the earliest of stages when a volunteer program might be envisioned through the ultimate stages of post-implementation assessment of the program’s effectiveness, the checklist detailed each of the factors that should be considered in envisioning, developing and implementing a volunteer program. The checklist was not limited to tangible or logistical items, but also stressed intangible factors that can be crucial to success, such as developing support by the bench and insuring proper supervision and training of volunteers. The project then applied this analytical framework to the Contra Costa Superior Court Small Claims Advisor Program (“SCAP”), as a demonstration of how a volunteer program might be planned and implemented to support an existing court program.

After completion of the original project in 1998, the checklist was used to start developing a volunteer program supporting the Contra Costa SCAP. Now almost five years have passed, and this year’s CEDP program presentation provides a unique opportunity to conduct a “post-mortem” assessment of the Contra Costa SCAP volunteer program in relation to the guidelines outlined in the original project. Recent interviews with the Small Claims Advisor and other senior court managers provide a critical framework for assessing how volunteers have been used in the program over the past five years; how effective and successful the use of volunteers has been; the pitfalls that were encountered and might have been avoided; and how the many premises of the original project have held up to subsequent scrutiny.

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