

Finding More Volunteers and Community Outreach is About Being Welcoming

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Published by SaveYour.Town/Books

Volunteer Ideas Quick Summary

"Finding More Volunteers" workshop led by Becky McCray and Audience Contributions - December 2025 IAFE Convention in Denver

1. Recruit Youth Volunteers Through Their Relationships and Activities

Youth volunteers come in pairs or groups, not as individuals. Partner with unexpected groups. **Frame volunteering as a path to employment.**

2. Become a Movement that Attracts People, Not a Membership that Burdens Them

Eliminate or minimize committee structures that require year-round meetings. Create talent pools where people can be called on when needed. **Tell people how you make a difference in the community.**

3. Find NEW Volunteers Where They Already Gather Around Shared Interests

Replace declining civic organizations with **informal activity-based groups**. Talk to every group that uses your facilities throughout the year.

4. Keep Volunteers with Affordable Celebrations, Recognition, and Letting Go of Non-Essentials

Show value with appreciation events, gift cards, distinctive volunteer shirts, thank-you notes, and text messages. Stop zealous follow-up on nonessential tasks.

5. No Coordinator? Share the Load Across Your Board and Community

Delegate volunteer management by section to board members. Use newsletters to acknowledge volunteers efficiently. Investigate loaned executive programs.

6. You Can't Always Fire Difficult Volunteers, But You Can Help Them Find New Meaning

Redirect negative energy into more positive roles. **Let new volunteers bypass conflict.**

Read on for more detail...

Volunteer Ideas from IAFE Convention

"Finding More Volunteers" workshop led by Becky McCray, co-founder of SaveYour.Town And Audience Contributions

December 2025 IAFE Convention in Denver

1. Recruit Youth Volunteers Through Their Relationships and Activities

Young volunteers operate differently than adults: they come in groups, they're motivated by relationships and tangible benefits, and they connect through activities rather than formal organizations.

Junior Fair Boards as Recruitment Pipelines

Contributor: Audience member with junior fair board experience

The Strategy: Their junior fair board has only seven youth members, but these teens consistently bring friends along to help with different fairground events throughout the summer. The fair has gained several new youth volunteers specifically because board members recruited their peers.

Key Insight: "Teens always travel at least in pairs. Allow for that and encourage it."

Becky's Response: Design your volunteer opportunities expecting youth to come in pairs or small groups, not as isolated individuals.

Youth Action Teams with Coordinator Partnerships

Contributor: Orange County Fair, California representative

The Strategy: Many school districts have youth action teams with coordinators who will actually drive youth volunteers to events. The fair connects with these coordinators, who oversee the transportation and provide lead volunteers to supervise the work. Staff members connect with one coordinator/lead volunteer, who then manages the youth group.

Why This Works: You're working with one adult coordinator rather than trying to manage multiple individual youth volunteers, significantly reducing your management burden.

University Student Volunteers

College Club Community Service Requirements: Many university clubs require members to complete community service hours. These clubs actively seek opportunities for their members.

College Core Program: For every hour of volunteer service, students receive scholarship credit through their university. The Orange County Fair currently works with six Vanguard fellows who each contribute a minimum of 3,000 hours.

The Pitch to Youth Volunteers: Frame volunteering as a path to employment. Many desirable jobs require applicants to be 18+, so younger volunteers can build their resume and receive letters of recommendation for future employment or college applications. As the Orange County representative noted: "Kids want that."

Big Universities Sometimes Reach Out to Rural

Becky's Addition: Don't dismiss working with college students just because you don't have a local college. Several statewide universities run programs that send students into rural communities:

- Oklahoma State University's Rural Renewal Initiative (10-week placements)
- Similar programs in Mississippi, Nebraska, and Texas

These programs pair students with university researchers but also require community benefit work, creating a ready source of motivated volunteers even in rural areas.

School Community Service Hours

Contributor: Audience member noting advantage of school-year fairs.

The Strategy: Many high schools require community service hours. If your fair runs during the school year, create a "honey do list" of one-hour after-school tasks students can choose from. Sign off on their community service hours as their payback.

Contrast: Summer fairs struggle more with youth volunteers because school isn't in session.

Young Offenders/Diversion Programs

Becky's Suggestion from Nevada: Partner with young offenders programs that divert people from further justice system involvement through supervised community service. These programs actively seek appropriate community service opportunities.

Youth Fundraising Partnerships

Contributor: Audience member with rodeo/horse show experience

The Strategy: Partner with youth groups that need fundraising opportunities. Example: The fair bought shavings/bedding at cost through a sponsor. The youth group cleaned horse trailers using those shavings, kept all the cleaning fees as fundraiser, and helped with parking for rodeo contestants and slack.

The Principle: Find out what youth organizations already fundraise for, then figure out how their fundraising activities could connect with tasks you already need done.

Donating Facilities for Youth Events

Contributor: Audience member

The Strategy: Donate your building for prom in exchange for National Honor Society and Key Club volunteers to set up the event. Creates goodwill and introduces youth to your facilities and mission.

High School Sports Teams (Off-Season)

Contributor: June from Maine

The Story: Someone suggested asking the football team during the off-season. Initial response: skepticism about "teenagers." The reality: "They were magical. They worked in the kids' areas, and they talked to little kids... They came on time. They had their little tags on with their name, Bob and Steve and everything."

The Lesson: "We've eliminated [possibilities] - we always ask senior citizens because they have free time. Well, maybe they don't... Who are the rest of the people we're missing out? And how about the people that aren't mobile but can sit and do things?"

2. Become a Movement that Attracts People, Not a Membership that Burdens Them

The traditional committee structure, with year-round meetings, note-taking, and formal obligations, exhausts both organizers and volunteers. A movement-based approach shifts from asking people to maintain membership to inviting them to be part of something meaningful.

Eliminating Committees Entirely

Location: Oregon

Former Director: Elena Turpin

The Radical Change: Eliminated their entire committee structure. No committees at all.

Audience Reaction: Mix of terror and excitement. One person: "I love it! Kill the committees!"

Elena's Philosophy: "We spend more time telling people how we make a difference in the community. And then, you become a movement that people can get behind."

The Distinction:

- Committees require regular meetings, note-taking, and year-round commitment
- Movements allow people to contribute when and how they can based on the impact you're making
- You don't call a meeting of a movement; people join when they see the difference you make

Talent Pools Instead of Committees

Story Source: Kathryn Witherington, Walla Walla, Washington (working on affordable housing project)

The Problem: A property transfer expert offered to help. Board president said: "Let's put them on a committee." Kathryn's response: "No. The committee has to meet year-round. Somebody has to take notes. It's about the meetings. We're going to just wear this person out before they ever get to the first property transfer."

The Solution: Call it a talent pool. "You don't *call a meeting* of the talent pool, but you can *call on people* from the talent pool."

Critical Distinction: "I don't want you to just rename your committees to talent pools because that won't do it. You have to actually change the way that you think of the people in a particular group." It's about expectations. Talent pool members can be called on when needed, without the overhead of meetings.

The "Come and Play" Invitation Model

Story Source: Deb Brown's RV TV event in Webster City, Iowa

Background: Iowa TV station travels to different towns in an RV, thus "RV TV". Thousands of people descend on downtown. Normally requires massive chamber planning of games, activities, food, entertainment - everything has to be TV-worthy.

Deb's Approach: Instead of planning everything herself or with just her usual volunteers, she opened it early: "Who wants to come and play at RV TV? Come down and play."

The Chili Cook-Off Example: An older man came to her office: "I think we should have a chili cook-off." He expected her to organize it. She asked: "Have you done one before?" "Well, I've never run one." "Have you been in one?" "Oh yeah, I've been in a bunch of these." "You can do this. You can plan it."

After more conversation: "You really mean I could plan it myself?"

The Shift: "We weren't creating it and handing it to them. They got to create it together, and that's a completely different thing."

Human Foosball Example: Church youth group came to Deb. "Human foosball." She had no idea what that was but said: "There's a spot right over there where it can go." She showed up and learned what human foosball was when people played it.

Becky's Summary: "All she did was set the context. It's gonna be RV TV. We need stuff for people to do. And then she just set some guidelines. Family-friendly. No booze for this. Here are your spaces. Please don't exceed this area. That's it. And then letting people come and plug into that event."

Being Present and Visible in the Community

Contributor: Amy Fleschmer, Franklin County Fair, Ohio (heard in a previous session)

Her Approach: Talks to everyone. Anyone who comes out to the fairgrounds at any point during the year - if they rent a building, if they're doing some activity - she talks to them. "Tell me about yourself. What do y'all do? What kind of activities?"

Results:

- Found out about township safety training → offered dead trees for wood chipper safety training ("I would donate my dead trees to use for your chipper training")
- Found out about 811 underground boring training → got fiber optic cable installed across the street ("We need to run fiber optic cable across the street. Is that what you mean by boring? I'd let you do that little job for your training.")

Becky's Response: "You have to be out in the community and talk to people to find out what they're doing and how that might plug in, as well as to share with them how you make a difference in the community."

Rob Lumsden's Branding Strategy

Organization: Western Fair, London, Ontario (heard in a previous session)

The Rebrand: "Heartbeat of Community" - but he said: "It only works if you act like that."

Tactical Implementation: Wrapped their van with new branding. "The worst thing we can do with this is leave it parked behind the administration building. It needs to be out in the community. We need to loan it to people. We need to be at everything. People need to see it."

Sharon's Reciprocity Principle

Contributor: Sharon (audience member)

The Insight: "In order to get the people from the community to come and support the fair, the fair people need to come and support the community."

Connection to Elena's Philosophy: Goes back to spending time telling people how you make a difference in the community. You can't just ask for volunteers. You have to be present at community events, support other organizations, and show up consistently.

How You Pitch Matters: Meaning vs. Duty

Becky's Example:

Bad pitch: "I need you to take tickets for two hours. It's boring, meaningless work, but I really need you to do it."

Better pitch: "I know the fair is important to you because (a special reason, like your little cousin is exhibiting.) We want to make sure we have enough ticket takers so that people can get in the gate easily and don't back up at the entrance. It makes a big difference to how smoothly the fair runs. So I would really love your help for two hours to make sure that folks' first taste of the fair is positive."

3. Find NEW Volunteers Where They Already Gather Around Shared Interests

Traditional civic organizations (Lions Club, Kiwanis, Rotary, VFW) have experienced declining membership and are no longer as reliable as volunteer sources. Meanwhile, informal activity-based groups exist all around us: people who gather around shared interests without formal nonprofit status.

Committees vs. Activities

Place: Caldwell, Kansas, population about 1,000 people

Context: Community workshop with introductions

What Becky Noticed:

- Older people introduced themselves by organizations: "I'm on the Chamber of Commerce Executive Board, I volunteer with the Historical Society, and I serve on the Alumni Committee."
- Younger people introduced themselves completely differently: "I love to garden. Some friends and I do a book club. Oh, and I have a little free library."

The Pattern: The younger person is not naming organizations. She's talking about activities she enjoys doing: gardening, reading and meeting with friends, making a little free library.

The Recruiting Shift: "She does not define herself by those organizations. Asking her to serve on a committee is a bit of a lost cause, but inviting her to an activity that she might enjoy and that you can show makes a difference in the community, and her activity can be part of that; you have become the movement that she can get behind."

June from Maine's Reality Check

Contributor: June (audience member)

The Observation: "We used to use the traditional organizations [Lions Club, veterans groups], but their membership has fallen off a cliff. And they are not great, reliable volunteers anymore."

Her New Approach: Started asking non-traditional groups: "What if you ask the football team?" (covered earlier in Youth section)

Becky's Call to Action on Activity Groups

Becky's Direction: "Instead of thinking about organizations, we're gonna think about activities. You're in Maine. Is there a kayak club or is there a hunting group? Is there a reading club? Is there a group that gets together to play table games? Is there a Dungeons and Dragons group? Who are the people who already associate with each other and are their own little community, **even if they don't have a nonprofit designation**... there's still a group of people who like to hang out together."

The Opportunity: "If you can put them in a place where they connect with the fair, they can be a new source of volunteers as well."

Groups That Already Use Your Facilities

Contributor: Kathy Kramer (from a previous workshop)

The Example: Their demolition derby needs cleanup afterward. Who does the cleanup? **The drum and bugle corps** because they use the facilities at other times during the year.

Becky's Response: "If you're not speaking to every single person that uses your facilities, you're missing a bunch of volunteer people. And they already know what an important place you are."

Action Item: Talk to every group that rents or uses your facilities throughout the year. They already have a connection to your mission and space.

The Honey Do List

Becky's Concept

What It Is: A publicized list of small tasks that need doing at your fair/organization. Tasks might be small, but the list could be long.

How It Works: When somebody is doing an activity they already enjoy - like power washing - they can plug right into your honey-do list without joining a committee.

Example: "After they finished power washing the deck with that satisfying quality of, 'Wow, look how clean my deck is, they can think, 'Didn't I see somewhere that the fair has a list? Could I go power wash at the fair?' They can plug right into that. Do they need to be on the committee for grounds and maintenance? Or can they be in the talent pool? Can they just find the honey-do list themselves and come do a thing for you?"

Other Applications:

- Paint picnic tables
- Winterize garden boxes
- Any small standalone task

Promotion Ideas:

- Post on Facebook with a picture: "Look at our lovely garden boxes. They really need to be winterized. Is there anyone who would be interested in helping out our garden boxes? **Tag your favorite gardener here.**"
- Flyer at the coffee shop: "Please come help our garden boxes"
- Make it easy for people to self-select into tasks they'd enjoy

Liability Solution for Honey Do List

Question Raised: Audience member with insurance background asked about liability when people aren't official committee members.

Becky's Solutions:

1. Make the first item on the honey do list: "Fill out this quick committee application form with your name" - then they're covered under existing committee insurance, but you're still not calling meetings
2. Get waivers from people like you do for events or using the grounds

Key Point: "Don't let it stop you. Y'all have processes for this kind of stuff. You can work this out."

Battle of the Businesses

Contributor: Audience member with large volunteer program

The Strategy: Work with local businesses and create competitions between them for volunteer participation. Present awards for business volunteer involvement.

The Benefit: Gets working-age adults engaged who might not respond to traditional volunteer asks.

4. Keep Volunteers with Affordable Celebrations, Recognition and Letting Go of Non-Essentials

Volunteer retention requires both positive reinforcement (showing appreciation) and letting go (not burning people out over tasks that don't truly matter). The goal is keeping volunteers engaged, not completing every possible task.

Volunteer Appreciation Events

Multiple Contributors

The Strategy: Host dedicated volunteer appreciation events with quality food and entertainment. One fair mentioned hiring a live band and investing in "nice stuff to feed them" rather than treating it as a minor afterthought.

Why It Matters: These events signal that volunteers are valued, not just used.

Daily Gift Card Drawings

Contributor: Fair representative with systematic drawing approach

The Strategy: During the fair itself, conduct daily gift card drawings for volunteers. Their secretary maintains a numbered list of all volunteers on a shift and randomly calls 5-10 numbers each day depending on volunteer count. Winners are called at their station with the news.

The Impact: "It generates a little bit of excitement when I call them at their station saying, "You just won a gift card."

Fair Swag and Milestone Recognition

Contributor: Audience member with 803 volunteers serving 16,000+ hours

The System:

- Track all volunteer hours
- At certain milestones, volunteers receive prizes and fair swag
- 500 hours = nice logoed jacket
- Annual volunteer banquet where they feed volunteers and present milestone awards
- During the fair: meal vouchers for volunteers who reach certain hour thresholds

Becky's Addition When Someone Asked, "What Can We Give Volunteers?": "Fair swag. Start looking around at what kind of swag you have available to you, like plushies, or there's bound to be more that is available."

Free Admission Incentives

Contributor: Megan, Arapahoe County Fair, Colorado

The Strategy: Can't pay volunteers, but bring in about 75 volunteers each summer. If they fulfill a minimum of eight hours (usually two or three different shifts), they get a free admission ticket that includes carnival rides.

Volunteer Identification and Visibility

Contributor: Jean (one of two Jeans who spoke)

The Strategy: Provide distinctive shirts or badges that identify people as volunteers. This serves two purposes:

1. It tells other fair staff and attendees to "engage with this person" and ask what they do
2. It makes volunteers visible and valued

Jean's Passionate Point: "We work really hard to get them there, and then we don't tell the rest of the fair people. I've got these great volunteers. I have Mary Lou, and I have Tom. You gotta meet them. They're great."

The Risk of Ignoring This: "People have come up to me and said, 'I'm never going back there because nobody knew my name. I didn't know where the bathroom was.' Think about how you wanna keep them and make them seen, make them visible, and make them important."

The Message on the Volunteer Shirts:

- "Ask me what I learned at the fair"

What's not on the Shirts:

- A specific year
- That way you can use the same supply year after year

Thank You Notes: Does the Medium Matter?

Contributors: Jean and audience member questioning email vs. traditional notes

Paper notes are appreciated:

- "Anyone can write a thank you note, and recipients keep them."
- "Gift cards are great, but when you get something in the mail, or you get an email that says, 'I don't know how we could have done it without you,' that's how you keep them."
- "In an age of AI, getting that piece of paper that somebody took the time to write on a piece of paper, thank you so much" carries exceptional weight

Email isn't a sure thing:

- Email can be deleted, sent to spam, or never received without your knowledge

One volunteer coordinator noted that many volunteer lists now only provide email addresses rather than phone numbers or physical addresses, making traditional notes difficult.

- Ask your detail-oriented volunteers to research and find physical addresses ("Tap your nerds to help you find addresses")

Text messages get through:

- "Text messages get read no matter what else is going on. You may not get through your inbox, but you *will* read your text messages. So, a thank-you text can be very effective, as well as a good way to mobilize people on short notice."

Stop Following Up on Non-Essential Tasks

Becky's Philosophy

The Principle: "I don't follow up on stuff that doesn't need to be followed up on. If you volunteered to fix the garden boxes and you didn't do it, then don't pester that person about the garden boxes. Look for someone else."

Why This Matters for Retention:

- Every follow-up takes your energy
- Your reminders pile guilt on them without increasing the likelihood they'll do it.
- Now they're less likely to volunteer for something else later
- While you're crafting that third reminder email, something critical might be slipping through the cracks

The Framework: Make a clear distinction between "must happen" and "would be nice."

- **Must happen?** Yes, follow up. Send reminders. These are your event-day essentials, safety-critical tasks, and legal requirements.
- **Would be nice?** Let it go. If the first person doesn't come through, quietly look for someone else. Or decide it doesn't need to happen at all.

The Real Goal: "Getting the garden boxes fixed is not your goal. Keeping volunteers engaged is your goal."

5. No Coordinator? Share the Load Across Your Board and Community

Many smaller organizations lack a dedicated volunteer coordinator. Rather than put all the work on one person, distribute the work across multiple people and tap into community resources.

Delegate by Section to Board Members

Contributor: Fair with board-managed volunteer structure

The Strategy: Assign one board member to each major section or area. For example:

- One board member runs the hospitality tent and oversees those volunteers
- One board member manages grounds volunteers
- Each board member becomes the point person for their section's volunteers

The Benefit: Distributes the coordination work and gives volunteers a clear contact person for their specific area.

Volunteer Newsletter for Consolidated Communication

Contributor: Evy

The Strategy: Create a monthly (or quarterly) newsletter that:

- Acknowledges all volunteers in one consolidated communication
- Highlights volunteer birthdays, milestones, and interests
- Announces upcoming volunteer events
- Started as volunteer-only but has grown to include the broader community

The Time Investment: "One person's doing an hour, two hours to create it. That's not a lot of commitment."

Dual Purpose:

1. **Recognition tool:** Volunteers get acknowledged in one place; everyone sees it
2. **Recruiting tool:** As Becky noted, "That newsletter could be a great recruiting tool. The more people that see that newsletter, the more people will end up volunteering."

Loaned Executive Programs

Becky's Suggestion

The Strategy: Approach local banks or larger employers about borrowing an executive a few hours per week to help manage volunteers. The loaned executive idea is common in larger cities but underutilized in smaller communities.

Where to Look:

- Banks (especially good prospects)
- Local manufacturers
- Any business with executive-level staff

The Ask: Request one day per week of an executive's time to support a specific need like volunteer coordination. If one day per week won't work, be flexible to find what does work. Maybe divide the commitment among a handful of executives.

Why This Works: Companies often have community investment goals. A loaned executive program gives them tangible community impact while giving you professional management help.

6. You Can't Always Fire Difficult Volunteers, But You Can Help Them Find New Meaning

Long-term volunteers who have become negative, critical, or obstructive present one of the thorniest challenges in volunteer management. The traditional employee management solution - firing them - is nearly impossible with free help. But understanding why negativity develops can open up creative solutions.

When the "Same Ten People" Turn into a Problem

Becky's Reference: "The same ten people" who are on all the boards and committees; sometimes the most experienced people can act negative to new volunteers

Understanding the Root Cause

Source: Gerontologist Leacy Brown (cited by Becky)

The Insight: Sometimes when you feel like you've lost control of a thing, you may act in ways that are not positive or helpful. But if you can see a new meaningful role for yourself, you can change how you behave.

Important Caveat: "This doesn't work in every case. There's no one solution for this kind of human situation."

Strategy 1: Redirect Some Folks into New, Meaningful Roles

The Key: Give them an easier, more positive role that still has genuine meaning. Don't make them feel like you're taking control away from them.

The Origin: In Minnesota, Deb Brown (SaveYour.Town cofounder) met a group of older people who said: "We are done volunteering for events. So, we're gonna take our lawn chairs and go to every event, and then we can just tell people how things should be. And we want you to call us the pillars of the community."

The Problem with that: How helpful is it to show up to an event already happening and tell them they're doing it wrong? Or that's not how we used to do it?

Becky's Reframe: "When I was telling the story somewhere else, I actually remembered it wrong. I said, 'they're going to take their lawn chairs and **cheer for everything** and be positive.'"

The Application: "I think that might actually work, right? If we actually had a way for people to encourage others. One person mentioned people who have mobility challenges. 'I can't come pick up trash on cleanup day, but I can come sit in my lawn chair and cheer and be positive for you.'"

Why This Works: Gives them a role that:

- Acknowledges their experience and history
- Doesn't require physical exertion
- Feels important (they're "pillars of the community")
- Channels their energy toward positivity

Strategy 2: Let People Come Alongside

The Approach: "Let people come alongside the same ten people, so that they're still doing their thing, but you can bypass a lot of conflict by putting boundaries."

What This Means:

- Don't directly confront or try to remove them
- Start new parallel but not identical efforts with fresh volunteers
- Set clear boundaries on what the difficult volunteers control
- Let natural attrition work. If they're negative and isolated, their influence will gradually diminish
- New, positive volunteers become the future

Strategy 3: Outnumber Them With Positivity

Becky's Suggestion: "Outnumber them with the positive people, even if you have to bring them in lawn chairs and surround them."

The Principle: Sometimes you can't change toxic behavior, but you can dilute its impact by surrounding it with enough positive energy that it gets drowned out.

Strategy 4: Never Confront Them Alone

Critical Safety Advice: "Don't go alone when you're dealing with this kind of negativity where it's toxic and painful, and somebody's feelings are gonna get hurt, or somebody's gonna end up yelling. Don't go into that alone ever."

The Rule: "Always take people with you. Preferably a positive person. So don't put yourself in the position of letting the negative person dump acid all over you. Make sure that they're gonna have to do that in public."

When You Do Have to "Fire the Free Help"

Audience Member's Addition: "Or fire the free help."

Becky's Acknowledgment: "It's really hard to fire the free help. It really is."

Unspoken Strategies Acknowledged: "We've all done these kind of management things of like, you forgot to call them, or they didn't get called up."

Sometimes people quietly phase out toxic volunteers through a little intentional neglect or oversight. It may offend the toxic people, or maybe they won't even notice.

The Most Important Thing

Becky's Warning: "Don't make them feel like you're taking control away from them because they will certainly not add more positivity that way."

The Balance: You need to redirect their energy or limit their impact, but doing it in a way that strips away their sense of meaning or control will only make the negativity worse.

These ideas represent the collective wisdom of fair and event professionals from across North America who attended the "Finding Volunteers" workshop at the 2025 IAFE Convention in Denver. Special thanks to all attendees who shared their experiences and creative solutions, including: Amy Fleschmer (Franklin County Fair, Ohio), Rob Lumsden (Western Fair, London Ontario), Kathy Kramer, June (Maine), Jean and Jean, Evy, Cammie (Canyon County Fair, Idaho), Megan (Arapahoe County Fair, Colorado), Sharon, Dick, and many others whose names weren't captured but whose ideas enriched the conversation.

Community Outreach Quick Summary

**"Idea Friendly Method: Open Up to New Ideas" workshop led by
Becky McCray and Audience Contributions**

December 2025 IAFE Convention in Denver

1. Participate in Their Events Before Asking Them to Come to Yours

Build deeper relationships by showing up at their gatherings first. **Find out what they do and what they value.** This applies to people from new housing developments, ethnic communities, age groups, or any non-participating demographic.

2. Engage Schools, PTAs, and Parent Groups to Reach Families

Beyond formal school boards and PTAs to reach organized parent networks, reach out to **informal groups of families** with same-age kids who do everything together. Focus on activities people already enjoy doing.

3. Make Your Spaces Inviting - Not Just Empty Buildings

Add lighting, drapes, and "little things" that make spaces feel homey rather than institutional. Groups will choose welcoming spaces over cold, empty barns. Small investments can have an outsized impact on facility use.

4. Design Programming Around What They Already Love

Don't guess what communities want. **Learn from attending their events first**, then invite their existing activities to your fairgrounds. Create low-stakes opportunities like free community days, kids' activities, and showcase events for cultural performances.

Read on for more detail...

Community Outreach is About Being Welcoming

Welcoming new groups and communities, creating welcoming spaces

"Idea Friendly Method: Open Up to New Ideas" workshop led by Becky McCray, co-founder of SaveYour.Town

And Audience Contributions

December 2025 IAFE Convention in Denver

The Challenge

How do you bring new communities to your fairgrounds when they haven't participated in the past? Whether you're trying to reach people from different neighborhoods, new housing developments, ethnic communities, different age groups, or any demographic that doesn't currently engage with your fair, the answer isn't just louder promotion or more invitations.

The fundamental shift:

Outreach is more than asking people to come to you. It's also about getting to know them and being welcoming.

This means two things:

1. **Welcoming new groups and communities** through reciprocity and relationship-building
2. **Creating welcoming spaces** that people actually want to use

1. Participate in Their Events Before Asking Them to Come to Yours

True community outreach requires reciprocity. You can't just invite people and expect them to show up. You have to build genuine relationships first.

The Fundamental Principle

Becky's Framework: "If you want to bring people from a particular community... you have to go to them first, and you have to participate in their events that they're already doing for themselves before they can come and participate in yours. And so you have to **find out what they do and what they value** in order to entice people to you."

What This Looks Like in Practice

Go to their events first:

- Attend community gatherings, festivals, celebrations
- Show up without an agenda or ask
- Learn by observing and listening
- Build face-to-face relationships over time

Find out what they do and what they value:

- What activities do they already organize for themselves?
- What matters most to their community?
- What are their existing traditions and gathering patterns?
- Who are their trusted leaders and connectors?

This applies to any non-participating group

- New housing developments where residents don't yet feel connected to the broader community
- Ethnic communities with their own established social networks
- Age groups (young families, retirees) who haven't found their place at the fair;
- Any demographic that currently doesn't participate in your events

Why Reciprocity Matters

When you participate in their events before asking them to come to yours, you:

- Demonstrate respect for what they've already built
- Show genuine interest rather than transactional intent
- Build trust through presence, not promises
- Learn what would actually appeal to them (rather than guessing)

Connection to Volunteer Strategies: This mirrors the principle noted during the "Finding Volunteers" session where Amy Fleschmer (Franklin County Fair, Ohio) talks to everyone who uses her facilities throughout the year. She learns about their needs and finds ways the fairgrounds can serve them, which builds relationships that sometimes lead to volunteer opportunities. Here, the same approach builds relationships that lead to participation and attendance.

For more strategies on recruiting and retaining volunteers once you've built these community relationships, see the "Finding Volunteers" resource, also available from the IAFE Convention or from Becky McCray becky@saveyour.town

2. Engage Schools, PTAs, and Informal Parent Groups to Reach Families

Schools and parent organizations provide structured pathways to reach families, especially when you're trying to build participation from specific age groups or neighborhoods. Informal groups are smaller and more tightly connected.

Working Through Formal Channels

Audience Contributor's Advice:

"Depending on when or where, what time of year your event is, if you're looking to a certain group like young children or whatever, certainly try to go out and engage your schools. And **if that means you have to go to the school board or whatever first to get permission**. But try to engage your PTAs, your mom groups, you know, things like that, to bring that age group that you're looking for. But certainly, take advantage of your school system and your schools for that."

Key Steps:

- Identify the appropriate approval process (school board, principal, etc.)
- Reach out to PTAs and parent-teacher organizations
- Connect with parent groups that serve specific communities
- Consider timing - align your outreach and events with the school calendar

Informal Parent Networks

Becky's Addition: "There's a lot of informal groups, where a small group of families that do lots of stuff together because their kids are about the same age. Those informal groups are also a great source for bringing new people into your activities."

Why Informal Networks Matter:

- Parents with same-age kids often move as a friends group
- They're already coordinating activities
- One enthusiastic family can bring several others
- They're less formal than official organizations but tight-knit

The Core Principle: "It really goes back to the activities that people enjoy doing. You just want them to be able to do it at your place."

How to Find Informal Networks:

- Ask parents who already participate about their friend groups
- Notice which families show up to other community events together
- Connect with coaches, scout leaders, and activity coordinators who know these networks
- Use social media to identify parent groups in your area

3. Make Your Spaces Inviting - Not Just Empty Buildings

Physical environment matters. When groups are deciding where to hold their events or activities, a cold and empty barn loses to a warm and welcoming community space.

The Problem with "Empty and Barren"

Audience Contributor's Insight:

"I think it's important when you're bringing these events out to your venue to create an atmosphere that they enjoy bringing their event to. If you're just gonna offer a big empty, barren building, they're probably gonna go somewhere in town that's a little bit more homey. So think outside the box. Make your event homey, make it so that they want to come to your fairgrounds to hold their events too."

The Reality: Groups have choices. They can use a community center, a church hall, a school gym, or your fairgrounds. If your space feels institutional and unwelcoming, they'll choose somewhere that feels like someone cares about their experience.

Simple Changes That Make Spaces Feel Welcoming

Lighting:

- Replace harsh overhead fluorescents with warmer lighting options
- Add string lights or decorative lighting for use by evening events
- Ensure spaces are well-lit but not institutional

Drapes and Fabric:

- Soften hard walls with fabric draping
- Use curtains to define spaces within large buildings
- Add color and texture that makes spaces feel finished

"Little Things" That Show You Care:

- Clean, maintained facilities (even if they're older buildings)
- Clear signage so people know where to go
- Comfortable seating arrangements
- Temperature control
- Updated restrooms

Becky's Affirmation: "Add a little bit of dressing to make your building more than just the giant empty barn."

Beyond Buildings: Welcoming Outdoor Spaces

The same principle applies to outdoor areas. Don't just offer "an empty piece of grass with nothing." Consider:

- Shade structures or tents
- Seating areas
- Defined activity zones
- Landscaping that makes spaces feel intentional, not neglected
- Access to essential facilities like restrooms

Is it Worth the Investment?

These improvements don't require massive budgets. The audience contributor emphasized these can be "little things" - but they have an outsized impact on whether groups choose your space. **Consider asking for “leave-behind” donations of drapes, lights, or decor that you could reuse.**

Return on Investment:

- More rentals and facility use throughout the year
- Communities that feel welcomed become repeat users
- Word-of-mouth recommendations from groups who had positive experiences
- Physical improvements benefit all your events, not just one

4. Design Programming Around What They Already Love

Once you've built relationships and created welcoming spaces, you need programming that actually appeals to the communities you're trying to reach.

The Chaffee County Fair Challenge: Building Participation

Context: Chaffee County Fair (Colorado) asked about building participation, especially for Kids Day, from communities that don't currently attend.

Ideas They Were Considering:

- Talent shows with kids
- Local dance groups performing
- Art shows
- Other activities that reflect what their community members already do and value

The Programming Principle

Don't guess what people want. Learn from going to their events first.

When you've participated in their gatherings, you've seen:

- What activities draw the biggest crowds
- What performances or demonstrations people get excited about
- What their kids are already doing and enjoying
- What traditions and cultural expressions matter to them

Then invite those activities to your fairgrounds.

Making It Easy for Groups to Participate

Remove barriers:

- Offer your space for free or at reduced rates for community cultural events
- Provide spaces that make them welcome
- Promote their events through your existing channels

Provide support without taking over:

- Let them maintain ownership and control of their events
- Be present and helpful, but don't impose your vision on their cultural expression

Programs That Create On-Ramps

Think about how to create low-stakes opportunities for new communities to experience your fairgrounds:

- **Free community days** focused on specific interests or cultural celebrations
- **Kids' activities** that appeal across cultural lines but include culturally specific elements
- **Showcase opportunities** where community groups can perform, display art, or demonstrate activities
- **Collaborative events** where you partner with community organizations to co-host

The Long Game

Building participation from new communities isn't a one-event strategy. It's:

- Showing up at their events (ongoing)
- Making your spaces welcoming (continuous improvement)
- Offering relevant programming (responsive to what you learn)
- Building trust over time through consistent presence and genuine welcome

The Result: Communities that feel truly welcomed don't just attend once. They become regular participants, bring their friends and families, and eventually some become volunteers and advocates for your fair.

Putting It All Together

Community outreach is about being welcoming, which means:

1. **Building reciprocal relationships** by participating in their events before asking them to come to yours
2. **Engaging schools and parent networks**, both formal and informal
3. **Creating physical spaces** that feel inviting, not institutional
4. **Designing programming** around activities they already love and value

None of these strategies require massive budgets or staff. They require:

- Genuine curiosity about other communities
- Willingness to show up and listen
- Small investments in making spaces feel cared for
- Patience to build trust over time

When you approach outreach as "being welcoming" rather than "going to round up people," you create conditions where different communities choose to participate because they genuinely feel like they belong.

These ideas emerged from discussions at the "Idea Friendly Method: Open Up to New Ideas" session at the 2025 IAFE Convention in Denver, with particular thanks to the Chaffee County Fair representative and other attendees who shared their insights on creating welcoming spaces and building genuine community relationships.

Audio transcripts by Audiate. Summaries drafted in conversation with ClaudeAI, edited by Becky McCray. Formatted by Ethan Charles.

More ideas for you

The Book: The Idea Friendly Guide

Available wherever you buy books in ebook, paperback, and large print. Learn more and pick up your copy at <https://saveyour.town/IFGuide>

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