

VPC Hires Volunteer Coordinator

The Vernonia Prevention Coalition (VPC) has announced that they have hired Heather Lewis to fill the role of Volunteer Coordinator.

According to Lewis, the project is a direct response to requests that were voiced during the Community Collaborations training sessions that were hosted by the Ford Family Foundation in Vernonia in the Spring of 2010. "A request came from every group [at the training] that there be a volunteer coordinator to facilitate centralized resources for increased access by groups (volunteer, non-profit, schools, civic, emergency response, city) to support and streamline collaborative efforts," said Lewis in a message she sent out to community groups in Vernonia which she hopes to engage in the project. "The VPC saw an opportunity to support the community by filling this position with a mind to their mission of engaging youth with adults for constructive experiences to effect positive change."

Lewis and VPC Director DeAnna Pearl have developed the program so it fits the mission of the VPC, who are funding the position. "One of the VPC's missions is to train mentors in order to have positive impact by effecting change within our youth's lives by how they engage in the community," said Lewis.

Lewis' project calls for training volunteer adult mentors to work with local youth on local projects. She intends to work through the local school system to find youth interested in volunteering for projects. Each student in the Vernonia High School system is required to complete 30 hours of

volunteer community service in order to graduate.

The timing appears to be right for this type of project because the city is facing budget cuts and constraints. Services that are necessary are having to be reduced in many areas of the community and the need for volunteer groups to take up some of the slack is self-evident. There is also a growing concern about how the city will manage and maintain all the properties (expected to be around forty) they will obtain through the FEMA flood recovery buy-outs. "We have a potential pool of workers at the school and now we have a way to constructively use those service hours," says Lewis.

But the city wouldn't be the only beneficiary of the volunteers Lewis will be coordinating. All groups in the community will have the ability to create "job descriptions" for volunteer opportunities and Lewis will help match up mentors with workers.

Lewis has hit the ground running and already sent out what she is calling a "Social Capital Survey" to begin gathering pertinent information about groups and their current projects and status; potential volunteer opportunities and needs within each group; and their interest in collaborating with other community groups.

According to Lewis, her work plan for the first year is three-fold: to gather the information in the Social Capital Survey; compile that information into a usable registry; and identify and coordinate opportunities for collaborations. She intends to hold training sessions for potential

volunteers, and also hopes to hold a community celebration. Her long-term goal is to help make community project and programs more self-sustainable.

Another large concern for Lewis is the need for volunteers to accurately document volunteer hours, which can often be used as a match when applying for or receiving grants. "The fact is this community walked away from a sizable amount of money because we hadn't adequately documented our volunteer hours during the flood," says Lewis. According to Lewis, showing community groups the value of their volunteer time will help make them more efficient and successful.

Lewis says she is available to attend any meetings to answer questions

and see if there are additional needs that this position can address.

Lewis says she expects to be very busy this year getting this project up and running. "I really want this to be a sustainable project," says Lewis. "It's important to establish in people's minds that there really is a value to documenting what they are doing and in developing these partnerships and collaborations, whether it's with the city, or with the schools, or each other. And hopefully there will be a synergy that develops and people will see the benefits."

You can reach Heather Lewis, Volunteer Coordinator--VPC at (503) 429-4677.

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