

Boulder, Colorado's Flood of Change: Creating a Culture of Community and Volunteer Engagement

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In the middle of the night, on September 9, 2013, I remember being awakened abruptly by the loud alerts on my husband's phone. As a volunteer for local urban search and rescue, he often receives "call-outs" for missing persons, but this call was different. Over the sound of the pouring rain outside our Denver, Colorado home, he said, "It's a call-out. Floods in Boulder. Building collapse in Jamestown. Don't know when I'll be back."

He spent the next 20 hours helping Boulder residents safely leave their homes amidst rising waters and washed out bridges. Then, professional duties called and by September 10 he had shifted from volunteering to his day job working with a national disaster response organization, leading a team of volunteers retrieving pets and livestock from flooded properties in Lyons, Longmont, and other rural towns along Colorado's Front Range.

Over the next week, the rains continued, with almost a year's annual rain falling in just a few days. The effects were catastrophic, damaging nearly 19,000 homes, destroying 1,500 of them, rendering miles of roads impassable, stranding thousands of people, and killing eight. Despite this rainfall volunteers began showing up. In addition to local residents offering to help, thousands arrived from far-off states to help shelter evacuees, clean out flooded homes and buildings, and dig out debris littering fields and roads for miles.

Fast forward five years: Boulder has, by and large, recovered from this disaster but has been forever changed. Not only has its infrastructure been built or reinforced to better mitigate floods, but the city has made a focus on resilience a major priority. Resilience is defined as "the capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses, and systems within a city to survive, adapt, and grow no matter what kinds of chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience."¹ Boulder quickly recognized that in order to build a resilient city, it would need to leverage all of its resources wisely - including the talents of residents and others who wish to volunteer.



Volunteers rebuilding trails and planting after the 2013 flooding.

City leadership acknowledged that during the 2013 floods standard emergency management protocols were in place to manage and deploy first responders, as well as to coordinate with recognized disaster response groups such as Red Cross. Yet no system existed to coordinate the well-intentioned armies of volunteers who showed up to serve. Developing a coordinated engagement strategy became part of the resilience plan and a city priority.

Leadership also recognized that having a strategy can only go so far. Truly implementing the volunteer engagement strategy would require a shift in the culture of the city. The first step, however, was hiring the right person to lead the work. Fortunately, Aimee Kane, who was already working in Boulder's Human Resources Department, was the right person for the job and became Boulder's Volunteer Program and Project Manager.

In this *e-Volunteerism* feature, I ask Kane to discuss why and how the City of Boulder built a culture of community and volunteer engagement in the five years since the floodwaters. Her answers provide new insights into Boulder's flood of change, and help explain why volunteer engagement is critical both in the moment and going forward.

Steinhorn: Why was volunteer engagement identified as a key to recovery and resiliency planning?

Kane: Once the community and the City of Boulder started moving from response to recovery, community members started reaching out to city staff to see how they could assist in recovery efforts. One of the first areas where volunteers were engaged was in cleaning up the enormous amounts of debris in our streets, parks, and trails. The amount of debris was overwhelming, and

residents wanted to help. At the time, the only departments with systems in place to engage volunteers in this type of work were Open Space and Mountain Parks, and Parks and Recreation. With so much damage to natural areas under these departments' purview, volunteers were welcomed into the cleanup and rebuilding efforts.

Many community members who were not already connected to existing organizations also reached out and were either turned away or told to reach out to other agencies. This happened despite city staff working overtime, staff who certainly could have used help from volunteers, both out on the streets and on a more strategic level with recovery efforts.

For example, city staff were monitoring dumpsters at debris dumping sites. Community members could have easily been engaged to alert the debris management company when the dumpsters were getting full and communicate about the arrival of new dumpsters. We also opened an assistance center where people could go to apply for building permits or sign up for assistance services. This would have been another great place for community members to engage to help spread the word about the assistance center or even act as concierges to help people navigate the available services onsite. Yet, there was no structure to engage residents in these ways – organizationally, we had no database, position descriptions, waivers or risk plans, and certainly no culture of accepting these types of offers of help.

As staff were turning community members away, leadership realized that we could do better.

This extended to our resilience planning as well. The city realized that not everyone was prepared for this level of disaster. Before the event, many did not know their neighbors. We found that those neighborhoods with stronger social capital (also known as connectedness) helped each other until help arrived, whether with food, clothing, or other resources. We now have a “Better Together” training for our community members which is designed to foster these relationships, and we’re currently exploring how volunteers can assist in delivering this program.

Steinhorn: Why did you take on this new role?

Kane: In May 2016 I was asked if I would consider coming to the City Manager’s Office to lead volunteer engagement efforts. At the time I was the HR Customer Service Manager and my primary focus was around recruitment and selection, talent management and organizational project management. I was ready for a change but working in the City Manager’s Office was never on my radar. Working with volunteers was something I had never considered either, but I remembered what it was like answering the phone in Human Resources and telling community members, “Call the Red Cross.” Always up for a challenge, I said, “Sure!”

Steinhorn: What were the attitudes around community and volunteer engagement prior to the floods?

Kane: In our organization a lot of people didn’t even know we could engage community members as volunteers, despite having community members serve on the city’s numerous boards, commissions and working groups. There was a misconception that, since the community pays our salary, they wouldn’t want to help us achieve city goals. Sometimes, in government, we have an “us vs. them” attitude between staff and the community, with staff thinking it’s up to “us” to solve any issues at hand. The flood gave all of us an opportunity to understand that we’re better together and can have a great impact when we work together.

Steinhorn: What were the first steps you took as Volunteer Program and Project Manager?

Kane: My first efforts focused on connecting with those who already engaged volunteers, figuring out what work we all needed to accomplish, and recognizing that we all had a lot to learn. That need to learn started with me. In the early days of my work, I reached out to volunteer coordinators and supervisors across the city to better understand their challenges, successes, and what would help them take their programming up to the next level. It quickly became clear that my role was to support those individuals by streamlining the great work already happening. There was overlap and duplication across their agencies and I wanted to bring together the individuals doing similar work and create a standardized system for how we operate and engage in the community. Not only would it help those working with volunteers to gain the resources they needed, but it would also enable community members to expect (and receive!) the same quality of experience no matter where they got involved. I also sought to provide community volunteers with new, meaningful ways to contribute across the organization.

Reflecting on those first few months, I realize we focused efforts on these key area:

1. Getting the right people on board
2. Organizing and prioritizing the work
3. Embracing a culture of learning

Eventually, we also incorporated another key step:

1. Keeping the momentum going.

Through this listening campaign with Boulder's volunteer coordinators, one theme clearly emerged: their desire to work together. Thus, the [Volunteer Cooperative](#) [5] was born.

The Volunteer Cooperative is comprised of city staff dedicated in some way to volunteer engagement. The team meets every two months and its focus is on creating the city's volunteer program infrastructure and enhancing volunteer experience.

Steinhorn: How did you get the right people to commit to the Cooperative?



Kane: I have heard from a few of the Cooperative team members that the creation of my position and having it sit in the City Manager's Office was a clear statement by leadership that volunteer engagement is important. Several coordinators reported that it was the first time volunteer engagement was recognized, and they felt that this was the opportunity to effect change. Coordinators have been able to dedicate time to the Cooperative more easily when their supervisors see that the initiative is supported by the City Manager's Office.

Even more impactful was our philosophy of starting with people who already support volunteer engagement. We intentionally focused our outreach to those individuals who work with volunteers because they are the experts. I admitted early on that I wasn't the expert or anybody's boss. It was important to involve the team in decision making and goal formation. It's their Cooperative, not mine and we need systems in place where it can operate no matter where my position of Volunteer Program and Project Manager resides. We have 31 team members from 10 city departments and the

programs range from cleanups to trail building, from ambassador programs to citizen science projects.

Steinhorn: What did the Cooperative tackle first?

Kane: The first couple of meetings of the Cooperative were pretty exciting. We formed a core team with more capacity to set the strategic direction for the work and align the Cooperative's efforts with city priorities. The rest of the team divided themselves into subcommittees. One focused on communications (working on efforts including a website), and another on process and systems (focused on efforts such as creating a citywide risk and release form).

Our first tasks included crafting the Cooperative's mission and vision. The mission became: *to support a community of service*. And the vision: *an integrated network of resources and opportunities to strengthen community stewardship and engagement*.

Steinhorn: How did the Cooperative's Core Team determine the actions that would achieve this vision?

Kane: Our core team recognized that we needed to organize the work, while aligning it with organizational and community needs, so we launched into a strategic planning process. Throughout, we not only involved all the members of the Cooperative, but also volunteers and city leadership to create the goals, objectives, and action items. Involving others in the planning process was vital because we knew that we needed broad input to ensure that there would also be widespread buy-in to the engagement strategy.

Some of the first goals identified through the strategic planning process included training of both staff and volunteers as well as developing more consistent processes and procedures for engaging volunteers across various city departments. While we knew these were vital to address, we weren't quite sure how to tackle those and some other issues. Fortunately, I discovered the answer while attending the Colorado Conference on Volunteerism where I first learned about the [Service Enterprise Initiative](#) [6] and the opportunity to become a Certified Service Enterprise. The information presented clearly aligned with our vision for the future and the process would provide us with a structure and path to address many of our strategic priorities while helping us make our vision a reality. Additionally, certification would be a way to invest in the core team, build excitement, and provide additional accountability.

After learning about the Service Enterprise program, I proposed certification to our leadership, who not only saw the value of building internal staff capacity, but also were intrigued by the opportunity to be the second local government in the United States to be certified. This was the support we needed to be off and running.

The Service Enterprise certification process included a research-based diagnostic that identified our strengths and deficits, 16 hours of formal training, and coaching to support us through implementing our strategic plan and action plans. Because the training focuses equally on best practices in volunteer engagement and change management, our team gained valuable volunteer engagement tools and resources but really benefited from the information on how to be effective change leaders. We made sure to keep Cooperative team members and some of our key volunteers involved throughout our training process by following up with lessons learned as well as asking our volunteers what they thought would be helpful in supporting their contribution. Bringing people along in those ways really helped our change process.

I am happy to report we received certification in May of 2018. Service Enterprise certification requires

a commitment to continuous improvement which aligns perfectly with our organizational culture, so the process won't end now that we have our seal of certification. To remain certified, we must sustain the work, complete aspects of the plan that haven't yet been finished and expand these new volunteer roles and procedures into other departments in the city. Maintaining certification motivates us and provides ongoing accountability for the work.

Steinhorn: What successes have you seen so far?

Kane: As noted above, the biggest change has been in our city's culture. Engaging the community now is considered a legitimate way to accomplish our work. But the culture wouldn't exist without new processes and infrastructure. Among our many new processes and systems are:

- New or expanded opportunities for skills-based volunteers, including a pro bono volunteers to help with city planning, skilled facilitators for community meetings, photography, graphic design, and more.
- Better marketing of volunteer opportunities.
- Consistent position descriptions across the whole city.
- Clear and consistent processes for screening, training, orientations for all new program volunteers, and volunteer feedback.
- New recognition opportunities including behind-the-scenes tours of city operations.
- Improved training for staff and more clear expectations of staff for engaging volunteers (i.e., including engagement in staff position descriptions and new employee orientations).

One of the biggest successes has been the implementation of an enterprise-wide volunteer management system. None existed previously, and we knew that having one database and communications system would be necessary to achieve our vision for the city. We are all excited about what this will bring and are eager to begin work on it this winter.

As a result of these efforts, we are seeing:

- Increased organizational capacity with less duplication of efforts among city staff around volunteer recruitment, training and annual reporting.
- Enhanced community engagement through partnerships in citywide events and communication of volunteer contribution through city communication avenues.
- Better planning to engage volunteers in disaster recovery efforts through stronger partnerships and planning with the Office of Emergency Management and Resilience Team.
- Increased financial resources put towards volunteer management, tracking, and recognition.
- Improved volunteer recognition through combined celebration events during National Volunteer appreciation week.

Steinhorn: Other cities or organizations may have a plan, but sustaining the momentum is often difficult. What lessons have you learned about sustaining a commitment to engagement?

Kane: That's probably one of our biggest challenges as a team. We're a busy organization and there's no shortage of shiny new objects and projects to chase.

One of the ways we continue to fuel this culture shift is by engaging a Guiding Coalition, which is an approach we learned through our Service Enterprise certification process. The Guiding Coalition includes city leadership who provide input and direction to the core team as we build infrastructure and implement our strategic plan and certification process. We specifically invited leaders from departments who were open to volunteerism as a strategy and those who we knew could help further

our goals, such as Information Technology and Human Resources. This whole Guiding Coalition approach ran counter to the way we normally do things in the city – and that was likely the reason it was so successful. Rather than asking leadership if we could come to *their* table, instead we invited leadership to *our* table and shared with them our proposed solutions. They had the opportunity to ask questions, share other organizational priorities, or suggest others to engage. It has been a great team to work with and has, in fact, become a model for how our organization can implement other initiatives. It's pretty genius in my book!

Additionally, the core team has been re-evaluating the work plan and reorganizing it as necessary. For example, we anticipated getting funding for the volunteer management system at the beginning of 2019, but we ended up getting funding earlier, which means some things moved up in the schedule and others have had to be delayed so we can focus on the database. Being nimble and open to change has been important.

We also work hard to keep people aware of our efforts through on-going communication. For example, when some new process or template is developed, we work with our internal and external communication team to tell our story through emails, newsletters, staff meetings, videos, and the weekly news that gets released to the public. This helps the organization keep the Volunteer Cooperative top of mind rather than fading away. It also lets other staff know of the resources that can support their work.

Steinhorn: Most engagement professionals work within discrete organizations, smaller than a whole municipality. What advice can you share about scaling this work to smaller organizations?

Kane: I talk a lot with individuals from smaller organizations who often have a singular focus or line of business and what I hear is the work and challenges are very similar. The steps we are taking to build our program could benefit any organization. The key is to build relationships with the people in your organization and understand their needs. If you have a team, share their success; if you're a team of one, don't hesitate to tell your story about volunteer contributions and the tools available to them. The steps we took were key to our success and they can be scaled to any organization.

Steinhorn: What made these efforts successful? What lessons can you share with others?

Kane: Many reasons played into our success. Of course, the flood created an urgency and a shift in how we thought about working with the community – but getting the right people on the team was key. Rather than forcing everyone to participate, we started with our champions by inviting those who wanted to participate and let the positive impact stories naturally permeate through the organization. As much as the team brought answers and ideas, they also were committed to learning from each other and from experts in the field. The whole team was enthusiastic about the work and were ready to dive in.

Creating a strategy provided much needed organization for the tasks ahead. The goals, objectives, and action items served as a road map for the journey. Since our team loves getting to cross items off the list, the plan also serves as a motivator.

Another key part of the change was our effort to communicate successes. For example, we were very careful to share success stories around community engagement in the annual reports of different departments, including Open Space and Mountain Parks as well as Parks and Recreation, where some of the early "wins" occurred. When staff and leadership began to see how much assistance the community was willing to provide, their attitudes really began to shift. These stories of neighbors

stepping up to help each other really had an impact not only in the recovery efforts but were instrumental in changing leadership attitudes.

While our journey may sound easy and streamlined, we did have some course corrections along the way. There was a lot of passion and interest the first few months of the Cooperative's work, but before long attendance and follow through became more of a challenge. We checked in with team members and learned many of them have a busy season from April until the end of September. During that time, we just couldn't maintain the same meeting schedules or maintain the same expectations around work to be accomplished. In response, our core team worked with other team members to change our structure in 2018 and moved from the subcommittee model to a project-based system, enabling team members to choose which projects they wanted to contribute to and which they may want to lead. This system has proven to be a more sustainable model for our team and we'll monitor it to see that it continues to make the most sense.

Finally, the city was willing to invest in the work – not just time, but funds. Leadership recognized that volunteers are not “free” – and engaging the community would have a cost, but one that was worth it. While the cost of the database is significant, we know it will be more than worth it because of the time saved, enhanced communications, streamlined application and screening process, etc. There is so much excitement around this effort that I anticipate many team members whom we haven't heard from in a while will re-engage in this project!

Ensuring that we got the right people on board, organized and prioritized our work, and embracing a culture of learning all proved instrumental in shifting our focus to volunteerism as a strategy for building organizational capacity and community engagement. We shifted from something that's 'nice to have' to a legitimate way of working with our community and getting work accomplished.

Keys to Success

- **Urgency** brought attention to the gaps between what community members were willing to do and our capacity to engage them.
- **Involving the right people** meant that we had a willing team who believed the power of community engagement.
- **Organizing the work** through a strategic plan put structure and accountability into our efforts
- **Communicating successes** formally and informally was instrumental in shifting the culture.
- **Evaluating and adapting** along the way enabled us to assess our systems, recognize where we were falling short, and make changes. Recognizing that this was new meant that we didn't have to be perfect. We could learn along the way.
- **Being willing to invest** not just time, but money means we can have the infrastructure we need to sustain the work.

¹ The Rockefeller Foundation. <http://www.100resilientcities.org/> [7]

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