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Tom Mechler, TBCJ Vice Chairman

New TDCJ website opens path to volunteer service

By Tom Mechler, TBCJ Vice Chairman

With the redesign of the agency's website, the Volunteer Services Program has been elevated within the TDCJ online community. Through a quick link on the TDCJ homepage, current and prospective volunteers can now access a variety of information to help them in their efforts to assist offenders. With a click of the mouse, they can learn about volunteer opportunities, submit an application to be a volunteer, retrain as a volunteer, obtain specialized mentoring training, or submit a proposal to implement a program or provide a presentation to offenders.

TDCJ has always recognized the vital role volunteers play in the rehabilitative efforts of this agency. Volunteers work throughout the system helping to provide literacy and education programs, life skills training, job skills training, parenting skills training, as well as preventive healthcare and medical issues training. They also provide

arts and crafts programs, drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, faith-based programming, as well as reentry services and other programs which aid in the transition back into society following release. TDCJ also invites special volunteers, such as sports figures or business leaders, to make motivational presentations to offender groups through the Speakers Bureau. As of September 2011, more than 18,406 volunteers were assisting TDCJ in its goal to rehabilitate the offender population.

The move to assist volunteers by providing Internet resources began in September 2010, with the establishment of the online volunteer retraining tool. As approved volunteers are required to retrain every two years, this online tool was developed to make it easier for volunteers to meet this requirement. A link on the Rehabilitation Programs Division's Volunteer Services Program Web page takes volunteers directly to a site where they can log in and complete the training. A

record of their completion is electronically reported to the Volunteer Services Program and the volunteers' files are updated accordingly. Data collection from online retraining began in June 2011; as of November 9, 2011, 833 volunteers used the retraining tool to maintain program compliance and active status.

In April of 2011, the Volunteer Services Program posted the volunteer application online to make it easier to become an approved volunteer. The application can be completed electronically, or printed and submitted in paper form. If completed online, the data is forwarded directly to the Volunteer Services Program where it can be expedited for processing. In addition to the application, the Handbook for Volunteers is also available on the Volunteer Services Program Web page. This handbook educates individuals about volunteer opportunities as well as the standards of conduct required when working with offenders. The collec-

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tion of data on the online application process began in May 2011; as of November 9, 2011, 1,368 new volunteers applied using the new online service.

Volunteers may also propose new programs or services through an online program proposal form, which can be submitted electronically for expedited consideration.

For volunteers interested in mentoring, an online course is available to prepare them to participate in the Chaplaincy Mentoring Program. Approved volunteers who successfully complete the course can serve as volunteer mentors under the direction of a unit chaplain.

The technical evolution of volunteer services continues with the development of an e-mail system to facilitate communication and information sharing with volunteers and community partners. The online Volunteer Services newsletter has also been developed to assist in the information sharing process.

As the agency's need for volunteers continues to grow, it is important to facilitate their participation in the delivery of effective programs and services. Through the innovative use of modern electronic media, the TDCJ Volunteer Services Program evolves to meet the changing needs of today's criminal justice system. ●