

Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation, Los Angeles, CA

“Tzu Chi” means compassion and relief. Under the leadership of Debra Boudreaux, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation never says ‘never’ to finding creative ways to serve vulnerable, hard-to-reach populations. The foundation’s headquarters are in Los Angeles and extends to more than 80 offices and facilities throughout the U.S. with over 100,000 volunteers and donors. Its missions are: charity, medicine, education, and humanistic culture. The foundation has a long partnership relationship with the Los Angeles county health department and strong connections to other faith based organizations, school systems, community centers, and social service agencies.



Model Practice in Action

Scale and Reach: A Call to Serve

The greatest strength of Tzu Chi’s organization lies in their volunteers’ altruism and generosity. Although all the model practices are crucial to the success of Tzu Chi outreach events, the volunteers play the largest role in terms of quantity and quality of Tzu Chi’s success. Tzu Chi’s capacity to mobilize volunteers and to engage new volunteers with the same heart and compassion demonstrates its unique strengths and capabilities. From flying doctors who travel around

the world, to the volunteers who help and guide patients through the outreach process, each serves with altruism and compassion.

The primary service activities of Tzu Chi are medical outreach and vaccination events held throughout the United States, with the greatest number and largest events held in California. These events are made possible by their large number of volunteers and collaborative relationships with local communities and partner organizations such as Molina Health Care, Kaiser Permanente, the City of Los Angeles, and community and faith-based organizations. Although outreach events are held throughout the year, three in particular are distinctive in scale and reach -- the “Care 4 a Healthy IE” event was a three-day event requiring months of preparation and training; “Care Harbor” was a five-day outreach event; and “Healthy Fresno” was a two-day event. These events target low-income African American and migrant farm worker communities. With over 1,200 volunteers enrolled in 2 shifts a day, they are able to serve an average 4200 to 4500 individuals a day at these three events. Such reach and capacity is made possible by the hearts and motivations of many.



What Does it Take?

Tzu Chi has standards and policies that translate into well-trained, trusted volunteers working with the health department and others to ensure this. Tips for replicating Tzu Chi’s success in recruiting and mobilizing volunteers:

VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT ACTIONS:

- **Recruit through partner organizations:** Keep in close contact with professional associations, schools, universities, and community and faith-based organizations; capture stories and use social media effectively to show impact in people’s lives and the difference compassionate care and service makes.
- **Match passion with roles and service needs: Let volunteers choose their role.** What is their niche role within your organization’s identified needs?
- **Model compassion:** Demonstrate a different way – more listening; reading materials in waiting areas; meals provided for participants; respecting culture and dignity. Many Tzu Chi volunteers report being attracted to this.
- **Educate Volunteers:** Educate volunteers: Provide education and enrichment opportunities so they appreciate the program and are inspired to return

HOW TO OPERATIONALIZE THESE ACTIONS:

- **Community partnerships:** Community partnerships: Maintain strong relationships with community partners for recruitment. This enables reaching the community where they hear stories of family members and friends of how they benefited; use schools to recruit students to volunteer; create relationships with faculty and directors of school who are similarly passionate; you may be able to offer students academic or extra credit for volunteer work.
- **Provide a narrative:** Have a mission you and others can believe in; don’t sacrifice this message and find ways to plug in volunteers through your mission; make it visible! At the end of volunteer events, give folks the summary numbers of people helped and tie it in to their commitments to serve.
- **Value, welcome, and appreciate volunteers:** Value, welcome, and appreciate volunteers: Let volunteers know they are appreciated and valued; place their narrative within the organization’s larger narrative. Hold dinners that volunteers’ families and colleagues can attend; give out certificates; ask for testimonials.
- **Stay connected with volunteers:** Capture and track information so volunteers can be contacted in the future; use social media for volunteer opportunities, spread news, send emails regularly; use orientations as educational opportunities, as they teach about the cultural approaches that need to be remembered; provide job descriptions.
- **Volunteer communication and relationships:** Volunteer communication and relationships: Provide clear directions; ask for volunteer involvement interests; recruit based on passion; provide volunteer evaluations and allow them to evaluate you/the organization.
- **Trainings:** Work with community partners to host training days where volunteers in training rotate through different activities, i.e., each person learns how to do one thing and then has 30 minutes to train the next person to do it. This exercise helps build leadership skills while learning.

Environment Context and Barriers to Success

The need for access to health care services is often greater than the number of volunteer health professionals – doctors, dentists, and opticians in particular. The scale of Tzu Chi outreach events, makes this a significant challenge. One way Tzu Chi creatively overcomes this barrier is by giving participants vouchers for another day or outreach event. This reduces wait times in lines and demonstrates the care and respect that providers have for those they serve.

Key Results or Implications of Success

In addition to the large scale reach, significant indicators of success in volunteer engagement are retention rates and the generosity of partners who provide in-kind services and volunteers. The rate for service provider volunteer 2nd year sign up is 70%. Thirty percent are willing to take time off from their jobs to support health fairs in other regions of the U.S. There is often a recognizable change in the attitude and perspectives of the volunteers.

The model practices framework has given Tzu Chi and its collaborating organizations a language for their work and a different way to understand one another. As such, they have been able to communicate with each other beyond the superficial and logistical – identifying and distinguishing the unique strengths of their services, the number of clients served and services provided – but even more so, on a spiritual level the intersection of shared beliefs and philosophies.

“The greatest strength of our organization lies in our volunteers and their altruism and generosity.”

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