

National Volunteer Assembly Proposed Item for Discussion and Decision: Area Team and Unaffiliated Chapter Annual Quality Assessments

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Overview of Proposal

When the National Council finalized its decisions regarding the changes to the volunteer structure in the fall of 2008, one of the highlights was an agreement that the criteria for area teams and chapters should not only include requirements around the filling of certain volunteer positions, numbers of participants, etc, but also that there should be an annual process of reviewing the program quality provided by the area teams and chapters. The intent of this is to annually track certain quality and compliance indicators in our teams, so that the volunteer leaders and staff in the organization can work to better support these teams in their efforts to improve the program quality in their areas, as well as to ensure program compliance to our standards and regulations.

We would like to propose that the delegates at the 2009 National Volunteer Assembly review and discuss this proposal, which outlines the specific criteria on which area teams and unaffiliated chapters will be evaluated, and make decisions regarding the following three questions:

- Are the criteria outlined in the proposal the "right" criteria that teams should be measured on, in terms of quality and compliance?
- Are the consequences outlined in the proposal appropriate?
- Should we begin the AT and chapter quality assessments in fall 2009, or wait until 2010?

What criteria will be used in evaluating teams?

Area teams and unaffiliated chapters will be evaluated on the following quality and compliance criteria, which have been identified by the organization as among the most urgent areas of needing improvement:

1. 100% of hosting placements by three weeks before student arrivals are scheduled, (in compliance with AFS-International Standards).
2. 100% written school approval and 100% of host family screening paperwork received by the time of student arrivals (in compliance with US Dept of State regulations and AFS and CSIET standards).
3. 100% of replacement host families submit their full application before the student moves into the new home (in compliance with US Dept of State regulations and AFS and CSIET standards).

4. 100% of liaisons assigned, registered, and trained before student arrivals (in compliance with US Dept of State regulations).
5. 100% of host families oriented (with appropriate documentation submitted to AFS staff) before the participant moves into their home - including orientation for all replacement host families (in compliance with US Dept of State regulations).
6. 100% of sending participants will receive pre-departure orientation before departing for their program (in compliance with AFS International and CSJET standards).

Teams that do not meet at least 85% in all of these categories will be asked to work with the Volunteer Development Staff and appropriate Hosting, Sending, or Support Staff, to develop a plan to improve on the categories in which they fall short by the following year.

In addition to the easily measurable compliance requirements outlined above, teams will also be evaluated each year on the satisfaction expressed through the Customer Service Evaluations that are completed annually by host families, schools, sending participants, and natural families. These evaluations will look at satisfaction over the last three years and teams will be asked to implement improvement plans (in conjunction with appropriate Volunteer Development, Hosting, Sending, or Support Staff) if any of the criteria being measured falls by more than 5% during the three years being measured or for any criteria that have less than 85% satisfaction from these constituent groups.

Consequences

In the fall of 2009, teams that do not meet the criteria will face no specific sanctions, other than the need to develop and implement the previously mentioned improvement plans. The first year will give us a baseline on which to measure improved performance in 2010.

Beginning in the fall of 2010, teams that have not shown improvement over the previous year may be subject to additional actions. These actions could range from requests to continue developing and implementing additional improvement plans, to placing teams on "probation," which could include additional reporting requirements throughout the year, to reducing the future hosting or sending goals of the team, to (in a worst-case scenario) the dissolution of the team. The goal of these actions is to provide appropriate support to struggling teams, which will gradually lead to a stronger and more vital AFS-USA volunteer organization. The decisions about the specific consequences for individual teams will be made by the National Council, based on recommendations from the Volunteer Structure Committee of the National Council.

Rationale

The primary rationale for implementing these assessments is to improve the quality of the AFS program, thus guaranteeing a better experience for our participants and for our volunteers. For many years, AFS-USA has struggled with improving our compliance to quality standards and regulations. One part of the challenge we have faced is that we have had no formal process completed on an annual basis which studies the “health” of our teams. This has left us with no clear way of addressing shortcomings on a consistent basis across the organization. By having a clearer process for addressing issues as they arise and working with teams each year to address their needs, the overall quality of the AFS program should improve in the coming years.

Potential Concerns

There are a number of potential concerns inherent in this proposal, including:

- Some teams may object to having their compliance and quality monitored annually and to being required to create action plans to improve their compliance. Helping those teams understand the importance of monitoring the compliance and quality of our program in their areas and ensuring that performance is assessed based on objective and clearly explained criteria will be key to successful implementation of this proposal – and to the success of the new volunteer structure that was rolled out in the fall of 2008.
- In the first few years, a majority of current area teams and unaffiliated chapters across the US would likely be required to develop improvement plans, based on current compliance rates. It will take dedicated resources to ensure this process is implemented and most importantly that teams receive the attention they will need to make improvements.
- We will need to ensure that Global Link has the specific reports we will need to run to allow us to easily measure each of the criteria being measured.
- The Customer Service Evaluation data will need to be reported on an AT and chapter-level basis.
- We will need sufficient staff or volunteer time to actually do the evaluation with each team and to work with each team to develop improvement plans.
- Once decisions are made about consequences for the teams not in compliance, the organization will need to support the recommendations – even if the recommendations have implications for the organization that cause short-term difficulties, such as the loss of a certain number of hosting placements or the loss of a long-time volunteer.

Potential Financial Implications

The “worst-case” scenario, of potentially dissolving non-compliant teams, presents a possible situation where either hosting or sending numbers would have to be reduced or other teams across the US would have to be asked to take on more participants, to offset the loss of participants in the dissolved team. While these situations would hopefully be extremely rare, we should still be aware of the possibility of this happening – and of the potential impact.

Another possible, less financially disruptive solution, and the measure that would most likely be taken as a first step, would be to lower the hosting or sending goal of the team, without formally dissolving the entire team. This could allow the team a means to continue functioning, but within a smaller geography and with smaller participant numbers. In the case of the hosting or sending numbers needing to be reduced in the case of a team that is not meeting compliance and/or quality standards, the financial impact on the organization will depend on the participant volume in question and whether or not we will be able to shift that volume to other areas.

Conclusion and Next Steps

After reviewing and discussing this proposal at the NVA, we would like to ask the NVA delegates to make the following decisions:

- Are the criteria outlined in the proposal the “right” criteria that teams should be measured on, in terms of quality and compliance?
- Are the consequences outlined in the proposal appropriate?
- Should we begin the AT and chapter quality assessments in fall 2009, or wait until 2010?

If the answer to any of the above questions is “no,” then the feedback collected at the NVA will be incorporated into an updated document, which will be presented to the National Council and to the Senior Executive Team of AFS-USA for approval, upon completion.

If the delegates at the National Volunteer Assembly approve the proposal, then the final process will be announced to area teams and unaffiliated chapters in late June, with an intent to begin implementing the evaluations by October 2009. The goal will be to complete the evaluation process before the 2010 Area Team Agreements and Chapter Charter applications are sent to the teams.