

Sign Posting for Volunteers Aboard

As interest in international volunteering grows, a new group seeks to "prep" volunteer groups with practical knowledge and practices gleaned from its pool of experienced volunteers.

ADELINE ANG checks out the International Volunteerism Association.

Doctors have Grey's Anatomy (the book, not the television series) as a definitive reference, lawyers rely on their legal precedents. But where do international volunteers go for resource information and support? Besides the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre and a handful of experienced volunteer mentor groups, there is now also the International Volunteerism Association (IVA).

The newly-established Social Enterprise aims to help volunteers and non-profit organisations by allowing them to learn from the experiences of those who have gone before them – probably the hard way.

"Volunteerism is growing in the life experience of Singaporeans. More and more people are participating and leading volunteer teams in schools, non-profit organisations and even in companies," said Theodore Teo, Vice-Chairman of IVA.

"We hear anecdotes (of misguidance) and wish that these volunteers could have (sounded out) their plans to someone familiar with either the place or the issue they faced, before they embarked on the expedition."

"We hear anecdotes (of misguidance) and wish that these volunteers could have had an avenue for sounding out their plans to someone who was familiar with either the place or the issue they faced, before they embarked on the expedition," he added.

IVA emphasises preparation for international volunteer experiences where physically challenging environments and cross-cultural issues may introduce additionally challenging elements.

The idea for IVA surfaced when volunteers from various groups came



together for a dialogue session.

Building from that session,

Dr Chan Yew Wing, President of the Raleigh Society and member of the National Youth Council's Youth Expedition Project's Advisory Panel, began to rally volunteers whom he believed would be a useful resource for others who may need help with their volunteer efforts.

The Raleigh Society, the Singapore International Foundation, the Scouts, religious organisations, and other similar groups have been part of a rich history of solid volunteer experience and management. Experienced volunteer managers and volunteers from organisations like these form the core of IVA's orientation and preparation for new volunteers.

"These groups were passionate about the quality of volunteerism. We realised that if there was a platform to enquire, to share, to get trained, provide others with a group of people to exchange thoughts and ideas with, it would be a faster, easier, less painful pace of growth for organisations to learn," Teo said.

The IVA says its training differs because of its international approach.

"While volunteer principles are quite similar, international volunteers face more variables in their challenges," Teo said, for example, "people-to-people sensitivities cannot be taken for granted."

Among its offerings, IVA wants to provide volunteers with training requirements, needs and risk assessment, social community learning, project evaluation

service and engaging overseas partnerships. Agencies focused on a targeted audience could seek IVA's assistance to help frame projects, customise, implement and evaluate their programmes.

Some of these services will be provided at a fee, with special rates extended to IVA members.

"The IVA is a social enterprise, so IVA will survive from the funds it raises from training and consultancy," Teo explained.

Teo believes IVA's difference may be in its consultancy services which cover a range of issues ranging from Risk Assessment Management Systems, Emergency Action and Communication Plans to Partnership Development and understanding host country laws, practices and taboos.

IVA held an International Volunteerism Forum on 5 July 2008, in partnership with the Youth Expedition Project of the National Youth Council. More than 120 practitioners in the volunteering field participated in networking and sharing sessions, as well as interactive panel discussions.

Last October, IVA held its inaugural "Breakfast With A Soul", attended by volunteers from such diverse organisations as ONE SINGAPORE, Asia Europe Foundation, Singapore Maritime Foundation, Singapore General Hospital, City Development, National Council of Social Service, National University of Singapore, NTU, UniSIM and Singapore Airlines.

More such events are in the works, and IVA has embarked on a membership drive, continuing its efforts to increase the pool of volunteers available to share, train and learn from each other.

"We know that fields differ, cultures differ, team member dynamics differ. IVA will promote best practices and minimum standards for volunteering," Teo said. ☆

Volunteers at IVA's inaugural "Breakfast with a Soul" gathering.