

THE WAY WE STAFF

A look at various CCCA members' staffing models





Photo courtesy of Crossings Ministries

Every approach to staffing has wins and challenges. Learning from what other CCCA member camps are doing can help reshape your game plan, attract new employees and rejuvenate your ministry. Here are a few ways camps are working outside of traditional staffing models for both year-round and seasonal employees. ►

Missionary Staff

When a calling becomes a career — as it so often does in the Christian camping world — employees may need to raise support to obtain a full-time or summer staff position. This often requires an extensive network of donors, as well as supporting churches and other organizations, to come alongside and provide the necessary finances for employees who feel called to camp ministry.

Camps that use this staffing model do so to keep operational costs down and make camps and conferences affordable for campers and guests. Todd Leyden, executive director at Fort Wilderness (Rhinelander, Wisconsin), shared that approximately one-third of their budget is derived from missionary support. The camp has been in operation for 70 years and has used the missionary staffing model for many decades.

“We use a team-based approach. The goal is to raise 100% of our support,” Leyden shared. The funds raised by individuals are shared across the organization; as Leyden notes, “Some people raise slightly more, and some people raise slightly less.”

Raising support for staff presents numerous opportunities for creativity. Sometimes, it means hiring an employee before they’re fully funded and trusting that the risk and investment will pay off. And many camps find it necessary to have a dedicated team member whose responsibility is to help their missionaries raise funds by developing relationships with churches that might be interested in supporting camp ministry work.

Leyden added, “We have focused resources on advancing the collective interest. We really invest in coming alongside the missionaries to find out how we can help.”

Craig Holmquist is the ministry partnership director at Fort Wilderness, and his job is to facilitate just that. He works with staff for nine to 15 months, coaching and aiding them in the process of becoming fully funded. He said that finding churches to partner with is crucial to covering the salaries of their 33 full-time staff members.

“[Church partnerships] grow the support base for Fort Wilderness because the people who support missionaries often love to support camp as well. So, it creates committed donors,” Holmquist said.

The staff at Forest Springs Camp and Conference Center (Westboro, Wisconsin) are also missionaries. Camp director Jon Classen stated that many staff members start as short-term contract employees who are paid a salary and may have housing provided to them. This creates a pipeline of sorts to bring in new, full-time personnel.

“When they hit the one-year mark, we have a discussion about whether they feel the Lord is calling them to be in ministry here, and there’s a dialogue about the process of joining the missionary staff,” he said.

After that, they become staff candidates and begin to raise support. The camp provides 12 to 18 months of training to help them learn and raise support in preparation for full-time employment.

One new hire at Forest Springs, Jesse Wells, said there’s a change in mindset when staff begin to raise support. It can be a blessing not only to the employee but also to the donor.

“One of the books our camp has used is *The God Ask*, and the author talks a lot about the idea that you’re not just raising money; you’re raising a community that is another field for you to be a blessing to, minister to and pray for,” Wells said.

So, while the donor plays a role through their generosity and prayers for the ministry, an opportunity also exists for camp staff to form relationships with many groups of people they may not otherwise be in contact with. This makes the investment much more personal than simply giving money.

Wells continued, “There is a great deal of intentionality in how you communicate with donors and ask for support. It’s been a beautiful opportunity to reconnect with people we haven’t seen in a while.”

Overall, the team at Forest Springs believes that the missionary model is an exercise in faith-building and trusting that God will provide.

“I have seen such huge rewards in the missionary model,” Classen added. “There are a lot of faith steps, but the support around those serving is phenomenal. And to know that you have a couple hundred people behind you, aiding you, praying for you — it helps sustain you.”

Trout Lake Camps (Pine River, Minnesota) decided that raising rates for camp was the best way to fund salary increases.

Wins

- Staff take ownership of their role and feel like part of the ministry. God raises up missionaries, gives them a purpose and calling and brings supporters alongside them as they see the impact of the ministry.
- Having missionary staff can grow the support base for camps because the people who donate to missionaries often feel passionate about supporting the camp as well, thereby creating committed donors.
- The process of raising support provides missionaries with a network of hundreds or even thousands of people who follow, support and pray for them and the ministry.
- A great opportunity exists for missionaries to build and nurture relationships that God is calling them into through the fundraising process.

Challenges

- Two of the most significant challenges are the fear of asking for support and the level of faith required to trust that God will provide the donors to meet the needs.
- Some staff members may be resistant to the idea of asking for money or the time required to write update letters and communicate with donors.
- It is a big cultural shift if camps have traditionally paid their staff or when new hires have not had to raise funds for a job before. Camps should initiate the process gradually and allow sufficient time for employees to raise their support. ►

Photo courtesy of Inspiration Point Christian Camp and Retreat Center



Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon



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Volunteer Staff

Employing volunteer summer staff, while common among camps, often means using inventive ways to recruit people. Youth and college-aged kids make up the vast majority of volunteers, and camps are competing with paid positions at traditional jobs. However, most camp leaders recognize that the benefits and rewards for volunteers outweigh what youth can experience at other summer jobs.

Joe Fahlman, executive director at Trout Creek Bible Camp (TCBC) (Corbett, Oregon), said they hire around 100 volunteer staff each summer and have utilized this approach for nearly 70 years.

“We mostly recruit through word of mouth, and a lot of volunteers come from campers who’ve attended before. Others we find through the internet or a referral from staff who have worked here,” he said.

At TCBC, Fahlman said volunteers are drawn to the culture and environment, often because they want to give back to the camp where they had a wonderful experience as campers.

Program director Jessica Kreider at Camp Mack (Milford, Indiana) said their team works hard to identify campers who show potential to serve at camp in the years to come.

“We work at growing future leaders, so we’re looking at our campers to become CITs, counselors and summer staff. Our hired staff is always looking to identify campers who are showing good leadership potential,” Kreider said.

Kreider believes that one of the best ways to recruit volunteers is to think about and build a network of people who might be interested in the camp.

“You have to keep building that web of connections and use the power of relationships,” she said, “by getting out there and networking, being in the field, asking people who they know. Remember that each person you talk to has a network that can help you.”

In addition to the usual high school and college-aged volunteers, Kreider said that parents, grandparents and retirees play an important role in rounding out their summer crew. They serve as counselors, lead Bible studies or provide relief for other staff. Their longevity and commitment to the camp — often for decades — serve as a model for campers to aspire to. Also, the growth that staff experience during the season is exponential — one of the many rewards of volunteering, she said.

“You never stop growing. Our leaders are always learning every day. By being able to show love and empathy to our campers who have challenges and working with kids from a variety of stages and places in life, they are encouraged to grow,” she added.

Wins

- Volunteer staff often are the most loyal to the camp and its mission. There is no question that they want to be there because of their love for the ministry.
- Having an all-volunteer summer staff helps keep costs down for campers, allowing more kids to access the ministry and the benefits of camp.
- Camps expand their capacity to serve because volunteers make it possible to achieve more in areas that may not otherwise be fully staffed.

Challenges

- Leaders need to be flexible in identifying training methods and schedules that work well for everyone, as volunteer staff often have other commitments.
- Volunteers can be harder to engage and motivate for the entire summer due to competing responsibilities and other opportunities.
- Camps must be intentional about whom they hire to ensure that standards are upheld, their belief systems are adhered to and the culture and community remain unaffected. ►



Photo courtesy of SpringHill

Increasing Salaries to Attract and Retain Staff

Camps may consider raising salaries to remain competitive in an economic environment where wages continue to increase, inflation persists and there is competition for higher-paying positions.

James Rock, executive director at Trout Lake Camps (Pine River, Minnesota), said that it has always been a top priority for the camp to offer competitive salaries comparable to those at other camps and summer jobs. That is especially true for high school and college students, he said.

“There are more jobs, and competition for salaries is higher,” he shared. “We increased our rates one summer, and that was an attempt to make the pay fairer for the summer staff because we know that staff can make much more money off-grounds.”

Rock said that while many camps rent their facilities on weekends or shorten their camping weeks to subsidize their summer camps, Trout Lake decided that raising rates for camp was the best way to fund salary increases. That money went directly to the nearly 170 summer staff employed by Trout Lake.

Peter Fiorello, executive director at Black Rock Christian Camps (Quarryville, Pennsylvania), agreed that increasing salaries has elevated the quality of staff they’ve been able to recruit. Black Rock leadership was able to use funds from other areas to direct more money toward wages.

“We have paid pretty well in the past, and we’ve increased opportunities for kids,” he said. “Last year, we felt like we wanted to move the needle some more, so we increased their pay rate significantly and added a year-end bonus.”

Equally important, he said, is making the overall summer camp experience better for the staff. Black Rock began incorporating weekend trips to the beach, excursions to nearby attractions, offering “soul care” and counseling support.

“We try to invest in the [staff] while they’re here,” he commented. “We’re trying to create a well-rounded experience and love on our staff throughout the entire summer.”

Wins

- Increasing wages can make camp opportunities more competitive with other summer jobs that high school and college students are seeking.
- Staff feel valued and appreciated when compensated fairly in the marketplace. The recruits tend to be of higher quality and more motivated.
- Higher pay can reduce turnover the following year and create a sense of loyalty to the camp.

Challenges

- Camps may need to raise the cost to campers to compensate summer staff more competitively.
- Raising the cost to campers could negatively impact the number of people able to attend camp on a yearly basis.
- Finding funds to cover salary increases can be challenging. It will be necessary to rework other areas of the budget or find new, creative ways to subsidize the funds if raising the cost of camp is nonnegotiable.

Hiring contract workers for tasks such as graphic design, marketing, social media, recruiting, donor relations and more can significantly enhance the camp’s ministry capabilities with minimal commitment and overhead.



Contract Staff

Thinking outside the box can provide fresh avenues for solving staffing shortages or meeting needs in areas that don't require full-time staff. Hiring contract workers for tasks such as graphic design, marketing, social media, recruiting, donor relations and more can significantly enhance the camp's ministry capabilities with minimal commitment and overhead.

River Valley Ranch (Manchester, Maryland) executive director Jon Bisset said that he jumped at the chance to keep someone on staff who would otherwise need to quit due to relocation.

"The biggest investment we make is in the people — and they're the most important part, too," he said. "To be able to hire someone who has the skill set and passion for the ministry is harder to find. So, to be able to keep them on board helps us be more effective in what we're doing."

Dan Steele was a full-time staff member for many years before he was called away to ministry in another state. He, too, saw the value in staying with River Valley Ranch on a part-time, contract basis as a regional recruiter.

"The Lord was gracious to allow us to be a part of the ministry that we love so much. There have been busy seasons of trying to work in multiple roles, but I absolutely love it," Steele said.

Both men believe that the key to finding the right fit for a contractual position is to hire someone who is a self-starter, someone who catches the vision of the ministry, maybe even someone who is bi-vocational — and the first place to look is within the camp.

"So many [around camp] are gifted and talented and early in their careers. Start with people who you have a relationship with that have the skills and gifting for areas that you need filled," Bisset added.

Steele might be the first person River Valley Ranch has hired for a part-time, contract role, but will likely not be the last. Bisset said that the success of this arrangement gives them proof of concept.

"It has opened our eyes to the idea of looking for people who have an area of expertise, who have a passion for the ministry, who have the bandwidth to jump in where the camp has needs," he said.

Wins

- Hiring part-time, contract employees can save the camp money due to lower costs associated with recruiting, hiring, benefits and time spent on training and development.
- Remote employees can expand the camp's reach and network of people in other states, providing valuable services that don't require a full-time staff member.
- Contract employees provide a significant return on investment, allowing the camp to have the correct number of staff in the right positions.

Challenges

- If contractual employees work remotely, communication and connectedness can suffer. Keeping everyone in the loop and getting their input can be more difficult from a distance.
- Depending on the employee, loyalty to the job and the mission can diminish because of the distance and divided interests.
- Training and development can be more challenging to accomplish, making it more desirable to contract with someone familiar with the camp and the job. ►

Forming connections with colleges is mutually beneficial since the camp refers high school staff to the college, and the school advertises opportunities to work at camp in return.

College Credit and Scholarships

Another unique approach involves collaborating with local colleges and universities to identify young people who are interested in serving on staff in exchange for scholarships, college credit or internship opportunities. These types of arrangements are an invaluable resource for college students seeking to finance their education or gain experience and acquire transferable skills.

Trout Lake Camps in Minnesota offers several scholarships that staff can win at the end of the summer. One scholarship requires writing an essay, and another is funded by alumni at Bethel College who want to encourage students to work at Trout Lake. The scholarship grows each of the four years they work at camp.

“We are just trying to find ways to pat our summer staff on the back much more through scholarships, special events and meals, gifts and camp swag. We put a lot more effort into making the experience great so they will want to come back next year,” executive director James Rock said.

Rock finds that forming connections with colleges can be a valuable relationship for camps to have. It’s mutually beneficial since the camp refers high school staff to the college, and the school advertises opportunities to work at Trout Lake in return.

“We’ve strengthened the relationship we have with some of those schools so they feel connected to us, and we feel connected to them,” he said.

Derek Branstrom, director of the outdoor leadership program at Colorado Christian University (CCU), agrees that the relationship between camps and colleges can benefit both parties. CCU partners with camps, ministries and other organizations to offer college credit for the type of training students might receive while on staff.

With enrollment rates declining, the potential partnership between camps and colleges becomes increasingly appealing as schools seek new ways to enroll students. Camps have an added incentive for college-aged students to come work for the summer. Branstrom said that participation looks different for each camp.

“It varies greatly based on what [organizations] do and how they do it. For instance, their staff might be

going through training on how to lead rock climbing or training on theology or discipleship — skills-based classes — those that might align with a youth ministry degree,” Branstrom said.

Camps interested in offering college credit should start by contacting a local college that might be interested in partnering with the camp. Then, they should review the school’s curriculum to evaluate what types of training might qualify as an alternative to a traditional course, he said.

“A lot of colleges already have a system set up for this,” he added. “The challenge is that it can be time intensive to get the credits set up, but it’s a pretty low investment and runs smoothly once the initial process is in place.”

Wins

- College students need opportunities to offset the costs of tuition. Offering a scholarship, credits or internship in exchange for camp work can be an incentive for them to take a summer job at camp.
- Staff receive transferable skills while working at camp that enhance their resume and add to their overall college experience.
- Hiring interns and offering scholarships creates an opportunity to identify who would make excellent year-round staff or leaders the following year.

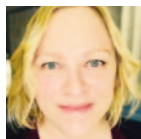
Challenges

- Internships can require a significant amount of time invested in staff development and mentorship, especially when they are only there for the summer.
- Ensuring that students are serving at camp for the right reasons can be a challenge if they are simply seeking to earn a scholarship or include the experience on their resume.
- Securing funding for ongoing scholarships can be daunting; coordinating the selection process and administering the scholarship requires some logistical support.

Recruiting Resources

No matter how your ministry pursues new employees, you'll find several tools and resources for CCCA members that can help.

- *CCCA's Recruiting Center*: Search CCCA's online database of job seekers to find ideal candidates for your year-round or seasonal positions. Purchase a one- to 12-month subscription to the Recruiting Center for \$169 or less, and post unlimited job openings or filter potential staff through The Job Agent. Log in to my.ccca.org and go to the Recruiting Center under the My CCCA banner to connect with job seekers.
- *Recruitment Tool Kit*: Inside this tool kit, you'll find tools and materials to use as your own, including graphics promoting the benefits of working at camp, blog posts highlighting past summer staff members' experiences, *InSite* articles with expert tips, Excellence in Training Webinars and Fire Starter videos. Access the kit at www.ccca.org/go/recruiting.
- *Camp Forums*: Engage in conversations with other CCCA members by responding to posts or creating your own to discuss various staffing approaches.
- *Excellence in Training RoundTables*: Join a Round-Table discussion focused on recruiting, typically held in January and September each year. Hear what other members are doing, ask questions and contribute to the conversation with your own experiences. Check My CCCA for upcoming events, and watch your inbox. ■



Meredee Berg has more than 20 years of experience writing and editing for print and digital media. She balances freelance work and full-time parenting in Colorado Springs, Colorado, where she lives with her husband and two daughters.

Photo courtesy of Word of Life Fellowship

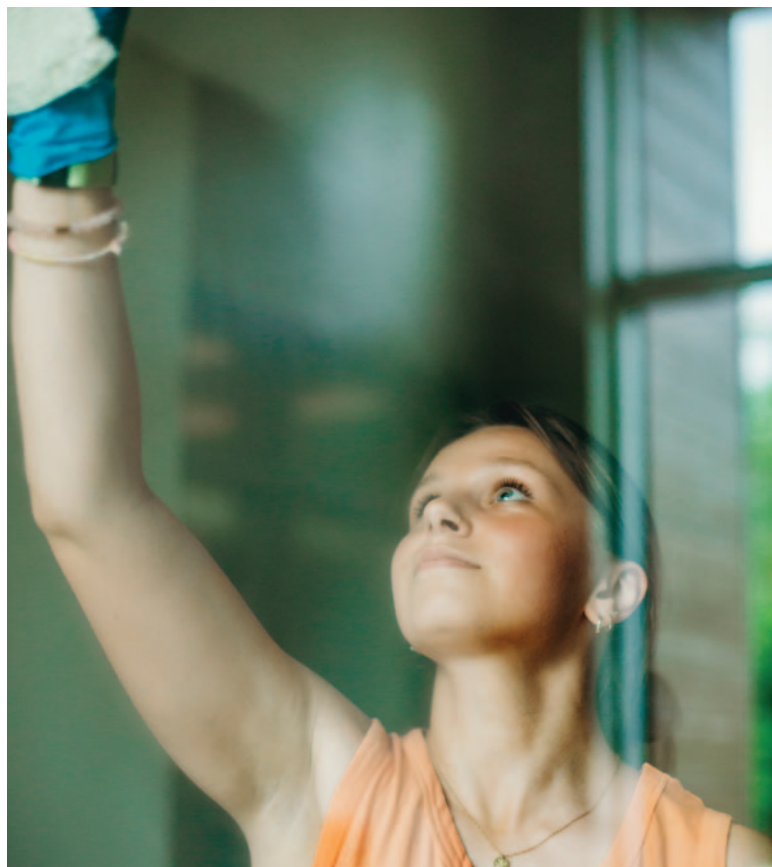


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