

Prelude: A "volunteer" or "traditional volunteer", is a person (or group) who chooses to serve and can choose not to, and might have expenses reimbursed, but is not paid a salary. A "mandated service worker" is someone who is under orders to serve, but might have some choice as to the nature of that service. This person will probably be reimbursed for work-related expenses and might also receive a stipend.

THE CASE AGAINST COMMUNITY SERVICE (MANDATED)*
OR
THE CASE FOR
OR...

... we really don't know yet, so maybe we should think more deeply about destination before we hitch a ride on any passing bandwagon. Mandated community service—presently involving youth, students and alternative service offenders—may in part or whole be good or bad for volunteerism, community, and country.* But we can't let it become another one of those things that "just happen" to us, without serious reflection guiding appropriate response.

* _____(footnote)

In this case, the country is America, which is all I know anything much about. I can only hope there is at least a little indirect relevance for other nations.

Heard from one volunteer coordinator in a discussion of mandated community service: "I don't care as long as they're warm bodies." From another, bitterly: "They're just 'dumping' on us again--another kind of worker they have no real respect for."

I expect most of us reject either extreme. We may be less sure of a middle ground in which both positive potential and potential danger are clear for mandated service. There are deep questions to consider first, most of them researchable, or at least debatable based on practitioner experience.

I propose looking at two broad areas:

HOW WILL MANDATED COMMUNITY SERVICE IMPACT ON TRADITIONAL VOLUNTEERISM (HELP OR HINDER)? and

* Ivan Scheier, Coordinator, VOLUNTAS, Star Route 46,
Madrid, New Mexico, U.S.A., 87010. Tel. (505) 473-7711

IN WHAT WAYS IS MANDATED COMMUNITY SERVICE BENEFICIAL, VS. NOT BENEFICIAL, TO COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY ? (Its relation to traditional volunteering is only one part of that)

A. In What Ways Does Mandated Community Service Help or Hinder Traditional volunteerism?

The discussion is organized around four positive and six negative scenarios. Your evaluation of these ten scenarios is welcome along with suggestions for other ones.

Scenario One--Positive

Mandate will engage in community service people who might otherwise remain on the sidelines. Some of these people will get "hooked" on human service in the process, and choose to become volunteers at the end of their obliged service. There is evidence this is happening, to some extent.

Scenario Two-Positive

Combining mandated service people with volunteers will substantially increase the numbers associated with volunteerism and hence its perceived importance and status.

Scenario Three-Positive

Government and political leaders currently place great stress on making mandated service work. This is expressed in many ways, including funding (lots of it, by our standards). By positioning ourselves as key players in the mandated service effort, organized volunteerism can enhance its own status to engage on behalf of volunteers.

A fourth positive scenario is presented later. For now, we'll move on to the first five negative scenarios. I don't know to what extent they counteract the positive ones; I do feel they have received less attention.

Scenario One-Negative

The volunteer coordinator will certainly want the most meaningful, appropriate work for mandated service people; just as she has always wanted the same for volunteers.* The question is: will she be able to get it. We've had trouble enough securing meaningful work for a steady supply of community volunteers. What will happen when we try to do the same for a surge of millions in additional mandated

service workers? Adding to the difficulty is the possibility staff will be even more resistive to responsible work for mandated service people than they have been for volunteers. In sum, Negative

* _____(footnote to previous page)

The assumption here is that though ordered into service, mandated people will be offered some choice as to the nature of that service. (If they aren't, their experience is even more likely to lead to an aversion for service work.)

Scenario One means a lot of people ordered to do a lot of work they don't like. In the process, they acquire a solid dislike of service and thus are less likely to volunteer subsequently. Positive Scenario One is actually reversed as the real message becomes: service is punishment (or at least, boredom)

Of course, some people might relish what we consider drudge work. The point is, the chance of meaningful matching between work and person is at least as low for mandated service as it is for volunteers, and probably even lower. Moreover, volunteers can refuse miserable work, or quit; mandated service workers are more likely to be trapped in it.

Scenario Two-Negative

Volunteering comes out of already scarce discretionary time and mandated service is about to take another chunk out of it. Something has to go as "free" time shrinks. *A Washington Post Weekly** editorial recently noted that mandatory student service in Maryland will make it tougher for students to find time for the part-time paid employment they need. How then will these youth find

* _____(footnote)

August 10-16 edition, page 27, "Volunteers for America" editorial.

time for volunteering, which is presumably something you might do after you have enough money to survive? Indeed, some youth (or others) who now volunteer may have to cut back on it as mandated community service cuts into their discretionary time. Others who might have volunteered, time permitting, will find time no longer permitting.

One possible way out of this crunch would be to grant "deferments" from the "service draft", based on actual volunteer work an

individual was doing at the time. This ought to be looked into, but I foresee some record-keeping headaches here and maybe some actual abuse of the deferment alternative. As a practical matter, it wouldn't be possible to evaluate and monitor all the proposed draft-substitute volunteer jobs; some of these jobs might prove to be trivial or even non-existent!

It might also help if "drafted" youth had the chance to identify and choose their own service work, before being assigned some. But meaningful work options might be very hard to find (Scenario One-Negative), especially for someone without much clout or experience in doing so.

Scenario Three-Negative

In most organizations there are just so many tasks available for "auxilliary personnel"-- volunteers, mandated service workers, and other people who are not "regular" staff or volunteer group leaders. This will lead to a significant number of situations in which volunteers and "involunteers" will be doing much the same kind of work in the same program. Assuming the volunteer is aware of this (fairly likely), he could feel distinctly less "special". He could even feel resentful when the mandated worker gets a stipend for the work the volunteer does without reimbursement of any kind. This possibility needs to be looked at carefully, via interviews with volunteers who serve alongside mandated workers doing similar work. It's dangerous not to know wh's happening here. We really don't need another volunteer de-motivator lurking unconfro~~n~~ted!

Scenario Four-Negative

Staff resistance, wherefore art thou, staff resistance? Everywhere, it seems, and for as long as most volunteer coordinators living today can remember. We often try to "convert" skeptical staff by telling them volunteers can be made "accountable" via good screening, training, job descriptions, supervision and recognition (reward those who do it as we like it done). Finally, we desperately tell staff that YES, VOLUNTEERS CAN BE FIRED! I believe all of this is attempted reassurance for a single underlying "loose cannon" nightmare for staff. Said otherwise: *if you don't pay 'em, and can't order them, you can't CONTROL them!* If I'm right about this, control-oriented paid staff will be distinctly more comfortable with mandated workers, because they are under orders (and may be paid a bit, too). Staff resistance to volunteers, already well-defended, now has another excuse: "Oh, we're already using community service people" (meaning mandated service people). Even worse is: "We're using lots of

'volunteers'" (meaning mandated service workers inappropriately labelled as volunteers)

Scenario Five-Negative

A massive influx of mandated service workers is likely in the next few years. A national youth service draft seems just a matter of time, and that means millions of young people. Also, we have increasing criminal caseloads coupled with growing judicial use of alternative service sentencing, presaging hundreds of thousands more mandated workers. (Nor does this exhaust all the major population pools that can eventually be pressed into obliged service; see later discussion)

These immense numbers are likely to overwhelm traditional volunteers, contributing to their neglect, and threatening their very identity. As for loss of identity, we are already seeing mandated service workers called "volunteers". Never mind that the word "volunteer" means "to choose" and mandated workers don't. (Presumably, George Orwell would not be surprised.)

Let us suppose now that we have decided to combine volunteers and mandated service workers in the same program. Ideally, we wouldn't do this without first pondering the preceding nine scenarios. But in the real world, we sometimes feel the imperatives of action preclude contemplation. In fact, many of the "volunteer" programs I visit these days have as many people who have to be there, as chose to be. So let us run some combined-program scenarios.

On the "plus" side, combining the two groups gives us bigger numbers and the status of working with a "hot" population much in the public eye (Positive Scenarios two and three). Add to that...

Scenario Four-Positive

Volunteers might provide excellent role models for the mandated service people they work alongside. Moreover, volunteers might find this mentor role motivating in itself.

On the other hand, an opposite effect is also possible in the interaction of volunteer and mandated worker, as suggested in Scenario Three-Negative. Here, volunteers in jobs similar to "involunteers" might feel less special and sometimes even resentful. A related mixed-program drawback focusses on the program coordinator. She continues to face the classic challenge of

volunteer-staff relations, but now must also deal with two other relationships: mandated worker-to-volunteer and mandated worker-to-staff. This shapes up as a juggling act of formidable complexity.

Scenario Six-Negative

Speaking of juggling, the combined program coordinator will be constantly going back and forth between what on the average are substantially different motivations in volunteers and in mandated service people. My own experience supervising both kinds of workers persuades me of this. There are exceptions, of course, in which the differences are not apparent. And occasionally there are mandated workers who act like volunteers and volunteers who act like mandated workers. Moreover, we have things to learn yet about the precise nature of the typical differences in motivation which do occur. But, it seems to me the volunteer is on the average more likely to do more on his own initiative and give "extras". By contrast, at least some mandated workers will tend to do as little as necessary to "get by", unless intensively supervised, concretely prompted, and occasionally threatened, too. Further, the volunteer is more likely to be naturally supportive and enthusiastic about the program/organization's purposes and mission; after all, she chose it! Finally, recognition for people who serve voluntarily is bound to be somewhat different than recognition for people obliged to. I'm not at all sure how a combined volunteer-mandated worker recognition program would be synchronized.

We should have no less hope in the ultimate potential of the mandated worker than we have always had in the potential of the volunteer. But until that hope is realized, we are ill-advised to pretend the motivations of the two are identical. Supervision which is predicated on a person being a volunteer, when in fact she is a mandated worker, risks going awry. Certainly, treating a volunteer as if he were a mandated worker is a virtually guaranteed turn off.

Once again, the volunteer coordinator's respect for human potential will be the same in both cases. But the methods for implementing that respect must vary depending on the type of worker, and the ability to switch constantly and appropriately will be an additional challenge for supervisors--for some, too much of a challenge. As a volunteer coordinator, I sometimes got in big trouble unthinkingly treating mandated workers as if they were volunteers; for example, expecting too much initiative or enthusiasm. True, a better super-

visor than me--of which there are quite a few--might have made this work. Indeed, many might believe that if you treat a person like a volunteer long enough, they will begin to respond like a volunteer. (Perhaps this should be Positive Scenario-Five). Much as I admire the affirmative attitude underlying this faith, I have to ask: if treating people like volunteers makes them act like volunteers, why haven't we tried this, successfully, with resistive staff?

Let us now turn to our second broad area of concern:

IN WHAT WAYS IS MANDATED COMMUNITY SERVICE BENEFICIAL VS. NOT BENEFICIAL TO COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY AS A WHOLE?

The question now is asked irrespective of mandated service's impact on volunteerism. Conceivably, even if that impact proves decidedly negative, we may need to accept mandated service as the greater good at this point in history. To put it mildly, most of us hope and expect this is not so, and will do everything we can to be sure it doesn't happen. But unfortunately, it could be so.

For the rest, call this, "beyond scenarios to values", and anticipate some difficult going here. No research I know of can "objectively" resolve the deeply felt value-based differences among us on such matters. Yet, no profession can afford to ignore them.

Start with a painfully familiar directive: recruit more volunteers so we can cut staff, spend less on human services, and still maintain satisfactory quality of service. Today, mandated community service is being used an argument to the same end. Here, however, we don't even have to wait and hope volunteers will choose to pick up the slack when funding is cut; here we can order millions of people to do so "for free". In all this, there is no problem for volunteer coordinators who sincerely believe human services are over-funded and over-professionalized. But I don't think that is most of us.* For most of us, adding mandated workers to volunteers only exacerbates

-----*(footnote)

Nor is it most volunteers. At any rate, I have never seen a motivational study of volunteers which identified cost-cutting as a major reason for volunteering. How sad that volunteers, most of whom want only to enhance the quality of human services, are being used to justify downgrading it. The irony is worth a book, not just a footnote!

the ethical dilemma of using people we believe in to further an agenda we don't believe in. Among other things, persistent unresolved dilemmas of this sort tend to burn out people of conscience.

Another ethical issue revolves around obligation to one's country and community in a free society. The seriousness of that obligation is celebrated in Jack Kennedy's famous phrase: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." Less eloquently, many of us feel the need of a citizenry with less "gimmees" and more "give." But community need clashes with freedom when not enough people choose freely to answer the call to service. (But who defines "not enough"?) To what extent can a society tolerate individual choice, when one choice is refusing to participate productively (as society has defined it)? At what point is society justified in denying choice and requiring people to serve?

A cherishing of freedom demands the widest possible range of choice, even when we know that choice may be one we will not like. Indeed, freedom is defined by the range and meaningfulness of responsible choice we allow individuals.

But, rhetoric aside, the practice of freedom frequently loses out to fear--unwillingness to risk people making "the wrong choice". I'm convinced of this. This is why some countries make it a crime not to vote (as in the U.S. it will soon be an offense for youth not to serve*). It is further an underlying issue in the highly charged

*----- (footnote)

By the way, has anyone thought about how we will punish youth who refuse the call to mandated service? Or their parents? Will they become criminal offenders and be sentenced to a term of alternative community service?

debate about abortion. As another example, the unwillingness to risk a "wrong" choice has powered the progressive elimination of the choice not to wear automobile safety belts.* Early on, safety belts did not even exist as an option. Then they existed without much general awareness. Steadily, the intensity of pro-belt education and persuasion increased though individuals were still perfectly free not to wear the belts. But that behavior was less and less acceptable to decision-makers. So, as the next stage, laws were passed requiring that such belts be worn. Even so, a few stubborn individualists

risked fine or other penalty to make "the wrong choice" of not wearing a safety belt. For these, we now have new-model automobiles, which, if you are not fast enough, reach out and grab you with the harness.

* _____(footnote)

On background, I approve strongly of safety belts and have always personally chosen to wear them.

Readers of this journal probably lack obsessive interest in the history of seatbelts. What you might be interested in, however, is this: substitute "volunteering" for "safety belt" in the above chronicle and there is scarcely a ripple of inconsistency! That is, the modern history of volunteerism in America is from a largely laissez-faire approach regarding the choice to volunteer or not, through steadily mounting efforts at education and persuasion, then increasingly powerful social pressure, ending finally with policy or legislative mandate. Against the fear of people making the wrong choice--not to serve their community--individual freedom fades.

The triumph of mandate over choice won't end with relatively powerless youth and offender populations. Even now there is other precedent for low-income people; that is, obliged work in return for Welfare benefits. Residents in publicly-supported institutions (disabled, for example) could be next. Not too far down the line might be able-bodied Seniors ordered to serve as a condition of receiving Social Security? Say in about five years.

I'm not alone in being concerned about what seems to me the current over-eagerness^{to} trade freedom for service. Consider these two closing quotes, the first from *The Washington Post Weekly* editorial previously cited, the second from the Pennsylvania Association for Volunteerism's *Vine* newsletter, Spring, 1992.

"We are not arguing against the merits of community service, but the (Maryland) state board (of education) should have left this as a voluntary program, Perhaps that is why 22 of Maryland's 24 school districts were opposed to the state's decision. Encouraging voluntary community service is one thing, and a good thing. Imposing mandatory community service has never been right."

"In April 1990 Bethlehem (PA) School District adopted a program of high school studies which included a 60 hour community service requirement. It is one of 6 school districts with a community service requirement. A group of parents challenged this requirement in federal court asserting that the requirement violated their 13th amendment rights against involuntary servitude, their right of free speech and a right to teach values to their children" Judge Daniel H. Huyett of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania has granted the School District's motion for summary judgement and denied the parents challenge on all three counts..."
"There is a possibility of appeal."

Whatever the fate of appeal from this decision, it is a serious situation indeed which even raises issues like involuntary servitude. It especially pains me that this comes in some connection with volunteering, which means "to choose". However good our intentions, volunteer leaders should be the last people to preside at the death of choice.