

Volunteerism-Specific Values: A Proposal for Discussion

Susan J. Ellis

During the October 5, 1995, satellite broadcast on "Making Ethics Come Alive: Issues for Effective Volunteer Administration," sponsored by AVA and the Points of Light Foundation, Keith Seel and I explored the philosophical basis of professional ethics. Keith made two significant observations at the start of the broadcast. First, the subject of ethics is relevant to the day-to-day practice of volunteer management; ethics are not just a conceptual framework, they are a practical necessity and tool for everyday decisions. Second, ethics are the public extension of practitioners' personal values for the purpose of positive and pro-active collective behavior as administrators of volunteers.

Using The Josephson Institute of Ethics model, we outlined six "core ethical values": trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, justice and fairness, caring, and citizenship. These are a distillation of the most basic, universal values of our society. All are clearly relevant to the practice of volunteer administration.

In the broadcast I expressed my belief that, before we can focus our discussion on professional ethics in volunteer administration, it is necessary to add another layer of defined values that are *specific* to the involvement of volunteers. One of the roles of a professional association such as AVA is to provide a forum where we can discuss, debate, and ultimately articulate the values that are unique to our profession. In fact, I believe it is one of our obligations as professionals to engage in this sort of activity.

In this spirit, I then proposed some values that I personally consider fundamental to the effective involvement of vol-

unteers. I formulated these through my years of field experience with many volunteer programs in an enormous variety of settings. While I hoped listeners (and now readers) feel an affinity with this list, I presented these possible values for consideration—and debate. Publishing these thoughts in *The Journal of Volunteer Administration* is yet another way to stimulate discussion and elicit additions to the articulation of values that we hold collectively.

Here is the "starter set" of proposed volunteerism-specific values. Do you agree? In whole or in part? How would you verbalize the values of our field? What values would you add?

1. Participatory democracy is vital to making communities work.

Leaders of volunteer efforts hold the value that it is a good thing for citizens to participate in running their communities and in making sure that the things they want happen. This is the heart of volunteerism and is why, in a free society, volunteering is a *right*, not a privilege. (This is not to be confused with the parallel right of any agency or individual to refuse the services of a prospective volunteer.)

2. Equal respect is due to work that is volunteered and work that is paid.

Volunteer administration is based on the premise that work is not more highly valued when done by an employee (or, conversely, is not less valued either). The contributions of paid workers and volunteer workers are compatible and collaborative.

3. Volunteer involvement is a balance of three sets of rights: those of the client/recipient, those of the volunteer, and those of the agency.

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Despite wrangling over employee and volunteer points of view, each situation defines which perspective takes precedence. In most cases, the bottom line should be what is best for the recipient of service. But there are also group and other long-term considerations. The key is not to presuppose that one perspective always outweighs the others.

4. Volunteers, as citizens of a free society, have the right to be mavericks.

Genuine social change occurs when a few "lunatic fringe" volunteers are willing to be ostracized (even jailed) for their actions. While an agency has the right to refuse a placement to a volunteer, that individual has the right to continue to pursue the cause or issue as a private citizen. This also raises the ethical consideration of how we develop assignments for volunteers within our agencies. Are we expected to keep volunteers "under control"?

5. Volunteering is a neutral act—a strategy for getting things done.

Volunteering is done by people on both sides of an issue: Republicans AND Democrats (or Labor and Conservatives, in Canada), pro-choice AND anti-abortion, etc. Volunteering is a method through which people stand on their beliefs.

6. "Volunteerism" is bigger than "volunteer administration."

Agency-related volunteer work is only one aspect of volunteer action. In fact, numerically, the amount of activity generated by all-volunteer organizations and individuals working on their own is greater than that of volunteers in formal agencies and institutions. While it is legitimate for us, as practitioners of volunteer administration, to focus on values pertinent to agency-related volunteering, it is imperative that we see the broader context of volunteers in our society.

Right after the broadcast, Mike Newman invited Keith Seel and myself to join a group of Minnesota volunteer administrators who had watched the broadcast together. It was a great opportunity to get immediate feedback and to continue the discussion. Right away, Beverly Robinson

of the Minnesota Masonic Home Care Center added another volunteerism-specific value to the list:

7. Volunteering empowers the people who do it.

As administrators of volunteer programs, we should believe in the empowerment of volunteers, both personally and politically. On the personal level, volunteering contributes to individual growth, self-esteem, sense of control, and ability to make a contribution to society. At the community level, the collective action of volunteers who share a commitment to a cause is extremely powerful—real clout for real change.

Bev's important contribution to the list made me think of one more value to propose:

8. Volunteering is an equalizer.

When people volunteer it is often more important who they are as human beings than what they are on their resumes. In a volunteer role people can rise to the level of their abilities regardless of their formal qualifications. Teenagers can do adult-level work, those with life experience can contribute to client service without a master's degree, etc. Similarly, when being a Special Olympics volunteer "hugger," for example, a corporate CEO and a school custodian are equal—as are all members of a non-profit board of directors who share the legal and fiduciary responsibilities of this position whether they are employed in professional capacities or represent grassroots perspectives.

So now it's your turn. Please send letters to the editor or directly to AVA's Chair of Professional Development. As our new ethics statement is distributed, the time is right to engage in serious thinking about the values of our profession. It is our collective obligation to articulate the values on which we base our work.

For a copy of AVA's Statement of Professional Ethics in Volunteer Administration and/or a videotape of the satellite broadcast, contact AVA, P.O. Box 4584, Boulder, CO 80306, U.S.A.