

VOLUNTEERISM*

by

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A subject dear to my heart is also very important to you and we have some important thinking to do together, about volunteers and how staff can work with volunteers to make the best possible use of their talents and time. Volunteers can make a significant difference in the various agency programs represented here today.

First, I would like to throw out a new word and ask you to incorporate it in your vocabulary. Mr. Webster recognizes the word "voluntarism." A kind of corporate word, it means persons organized together to work toward goals which a group shares. I think that the new word I would like you to consider is "volunteerism" with two "ee's" in it. This, in contrast to "voluntarism," is concerned with the experience of the individual person active in voluntarism in a leadership role, in an administrative role or possibly in direct services to the clients or in supportive services to make program possible.

We don't speak of volunteer programs but of volunteer services in the agency program, unpaid man-power in the program of the total corporate body. There is unique value added by every individual who serves as a volunteer as well as a staff member. Just as voluntarism is essential for our social fabric and our democratic way of life, I believe that volunteerism is essential for the wholeness of the individual person, and that all persons should have opportunity to give of themselves on behalf of their fellowman no matter what their age or capacity. I am sure there are very few human beings who could not be effective volunteers in some appropriate function. Volunteerism must identify the best function for each individual at his stage of understanding and development. It is this process of identifying and providing the proper function for each individual which I would like to consider as administration of volunteer services, a profession with a basic body of knowledge I call "volunteerism."

GROWING IMPORTANCE OF THE DIRECT SERVICE VOLUNTEER

This morning we are not going to concern ourselves about what volunteers do, because volunteers are doing every conceivable kind of task in one agency or another. There are administrative volunteers who serve on boards and committees. There are service volunteers who work in offices. We even have some in state schools for retarded persons re-

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pairing bicycles in a bicycle shop. Whatever the skill the volunteer has, I am sure there is some agency, somewhere, which can use it effectively and give him the feeling that he is contributing to a very important program. The volunteers, however, that I would really like to consider most intensively this morning are those who are in direct contact with our clients, whoever they may be and who are giving their service under the auspices of an agency which has a service to offer the whole community. The volunteer has to find an appropriate spot within the total service where he can do well and know that what he is doing is important and valuable to the people he serves.

We have a plurality of volunteers today which is very exciting and opening new vistas for volunteer services epitomized by the federal VISTA program, "Volunteers In Service To America." The new ideas and tremendous capacity for service must be channeled into areas where they can be used appropriately, and volunteers can enjoy their work. If volunteering is not satisfying, there is something wrong. Some new volunteers who have not had a long history of being volunteers have less unlearning to do, with the social revolution we are having today, than some old hands at volunteering.

There is one generality true of all kinds of volunteers today and that is that they are much more interested in action. Volunteers are doers rather than donors, in contrast to traditional patterns in which we always had a few people around who supported our programs with heavy financial contributions but did not really do much else. Support for our programs is less personalized today. Volunteer skills and aptitudes have a tremendous value throughout our programs, and we don't choose volunteers on the basis of their ability to support financially, but on the basis of their interest, abilities, and concern. We involve people actively in determining our service goals so that they will make service goals their own personal objectives, understand how their volunteer work is important, and stay with it. There is nothing more important to the retention of volunteers than their understanding that what volunteers can do affects the achievement of the agency's objectives.

Volunteers want to learn, want to do a good job, want to fit into the whole. They want to make creative contributions from their own standpoint to the thinking of everyone. They help shape the design for the program as they gain experience. What they think is taken seriously, goes into the hopper and influences the final plans of the agency.

AVOIDING SOURCES OF CONFLICT BETWEEN STAFF AND VOLUNTEER

None of us would be here today if we did not see volunteers as essential to our total manpower. It seems to me that my task this morning, then, is to be kind of brutal in pointing up some of the possible points of

stress when staff and volunteers try to work together so we can avoid or correct them. I think that we need to face frankly some of the basic assumptions that create misunderstanding. We need to put at rest some of the myths about volunteers so that we can have more real relationships, not masked by myths, no misunderstandings and polite rituals which prevent real communication. For this reason, we must recognize some of the differences of perception between the people who are on the payroll of our agencies and those who are not.

The first point of potential stress is the idea of prerogatives. The moment I hear staff or volunteers talking about "their" responsibility or "our" right, I realize that there has been some threat to the individuals involved so that they have become possessive of their functions rather than working in collaborative patterns toward shared goals. They need to be liberated for work together so that they don't worry too much about whose right it is to do what. With our eyes lifted to ultimate goals, we can work together in a flexible and creative way, encouraging each other's participation to accomplish our tasks. Identifying the common interest in agency purpose is a first step.

Another possible stress lies in the threat which volunteers sometimes represent to staff when they are competent and can do the work, and seem to resist control by the staff. Staff is concerned that they will take the ball and run away with it. Staff tends to feel that volunteers may be irresponsible. We constantly hear this word about volunteers. On the other hand volunteers may feel that some of the procedures or policies which they encounter don't make sense, and see the staff wedded to patterns of work which prevent creativity and are too rigid. I think this is particularly likely in casework agencies where the added mystique of the case worker-client relationship awes many volunteers, who then subside into spectator roles instead of active roles in casework services. Only recently are we beginning to involve volunteers with clients in casework agencies. For a long time they simply raised funds or carried on activities related to public relations or program interpretation to the public at large without having any contact with program activities. But, this is changing. Now we are finding that volunteers can be very helpful in service tasks with clients. There is a special contribution volunteers can make because they have freedom to act and time to give and a person-to-person interest in our clients, where they live, might work or have to go for needed services.

Another stress occurs when the staff is perceived as being so expert and so busy that volunteers don't dare ask for help. They feel that staff is inaccessible and does not give enough help for them to do their jobs. They are not told what resources are available and would like more training and help from staff. On the other hand, staff tends to worry about taking on new volunteers because they think the volunteers will need so much time to be helped that they will just add to the demands

on staff instead of easing the situation. I think it is possible for staff to spend time with volunteers at the beginning of the volunteer's service and in regularly scheduled contact so that the time required by the volunteer pays off many times over. Volunteer activities relieve staff of tasks and trips, free staff to do those things which only staff can do. And even more important, the service gets an added "human-to-human touch" which makes it more effective.

We have some situations in which volunteers are "used," with the negative connotation that the volunteers are exploited. On the other hand, there is a balance to be maintained between "use" and the other extreme: over-protection and under-placement of volunteers. Often we do not expect enough of volunteers, do not give them enough responsibility, don't delegate authority when we delegate responsibility. Then, they feel demeaned and underestimated by being given a stupid task. So why bother?

Another cause of stress is the feeling on the part of staff that volunteers may get over-involved with a client and his concerns and become advocates of the client against the staff's professional decisions in a kind of anti-establishment role which can be destructive. Some volunteers feel that the professionalism of the staff means they forget that the clients are people with needs which ought to be recognized. Again, these points of conflict are not true in most agencies but the fact that the possibility for them exists gives us some imperative in our administration of volunteer programs to prevent the poor communication which can grow up on such misunderstandings.

CREATING A POSITIVE CLIMATE FOR VOLUNTEERS

In a good volunteer setting, volunteers feel that they get more than they give and they seek a chance to grow and to assume important responsibilities. They do not reach this stage unless they have good working relationships with the staff with whom they work. Individualized, in an accepting climate in which to work, they are not pushed too fast, but challenged enough, and given real responsibility and real appreciation for what they can do. Very important in examining problems in communication, and stress between volunteer and staff is the fact that it often boils down to problems in communicating, and the fact that persons behave on the basis of what they believe, rather than what they may know. Our beliefs are sometimes not even expressed but they are stereotyped assumptions which determine our behavior.

One of the assumptions that ought to be examined is that all volunteers are irresponsible. The phenomenon of "self-fulfilling prophecy" means that people tend to act toward us the way we expect them to act. If we expect volunteers to be irresponsible they are likely to be irresponsible. People are honored and stimulated by high expectations and make a real effort to live up to them.

Another assumption which I think we need to look at is that the volunteers are happy where they are over long periods of time. We don't review volunteer jobs often enough, we don't check out feelings, we don't give people an opportunity to move about and have a variety of experiences. If one is doing a good job we tend to give our attention to someone else. Each volunteer deserves a chance to progress, to grow in responsibilities when his competence grows. Mobility and promotion are most meaningful forms of recognition.

IMPORTANCE OF SUPERVISION AND CONTINUING TRAINING

Service volunteers, to be effective, must be supervised by staff. Staff keep them informed about developments and steer them where they're needed. There must be the same mutual trust and respect to determine the service values which we establish staff to staff. A clue to this kind of mutual respect is the placement of the volunteers, matching abilities to assignments so that people are in the most appropriate position to use their talents and skills and available time most effectively. The appreciation which the staff and the other volunteers have of one volunteer's contribution is a re-motivating force which sometimes must be made explicit as well as implicit in trusting the volunteer with further responsibility. We have to guard against pushing volunteers into greater responsibilities before they are ready. Volunteer failure is a very painful and bad experience which does not end with our loss of the volunteer. Often embittered, his version of the experience becomes a negative interpretation of our program in the community. We want to be sure that changes and progression to greater responsibilities are freely accepted, as truly voluntary as initial placement.

An element which contributes to good collaborative relationships is an attitude of openness to learning in all persons. Volunteer or staff, we need opportunities to learn as relevant information is available. Some new roles for volunteers require new forms of learning, not just a classroom setting. Some adults find classrooms uncomfortable because of their past experience. We have discovered that we don't have such a thing as a "fully trained" worker, whether the worker is volunteer or staff. Too much happens too fast these days for anyone to stop learning. What we need is workers open to new developments and new ideas, willing to experiment, flexible about program, policies, and developments, and excited and enthusiastic about innovations in every part of an organization. It is equally important for a Board of Directors to accept the fact that an agency is a "becoming" organization, not a finished, polished, inflexible, crystalized organization. Volunteers can contribute from their perspective and insights to new developments and new forms of services important to the goals of the agency.

One device for learning with new volunteers is eliminating the classroom kind of orientation experience until the volunteer expresses a need for more learning. Plunged into apprenticeship roles very quickly, actually

on the job under the supervision of more experienced volunteers or staff, volunteers become aware of what their learning needs are before they join groups to learn with other people who have the same learning needs. A block to learning for volunteers is a kind of mystique around what the professional roles are. Volunteers want to participate and they can become extremely adept at reinforcing and strengthening and extending the professional roles as they understand them. A volunteer who has worked with a skilled professional is the best advocate of the need for professional staff. The respect and appreciation developed in harness with good professionals is persuasive in interpreting the need for adequate salary provisions and good personnel policies for staff.

Learning opportunities for staff and volunteers can frequently be shared as a new program emphasis is being developed by an agency. When staff and volunteers learn together about new priorities and implementation of new forms of service, we shake down in our complementary roles together. This kind of experience helps to develop the kinds of respect and mutual trust which have proved so important to collaborative relationships.

Essential to learning for volunteers is the kind of supervision they get in their work. Particularly important for the social work community is the difference from professional supervision. Ways of work in the field of casework, particularly, are not appropriate for supervising volunteers. It is not necessary to develop the professional self-consciousness in volunteers which the professional social worker seeks in professional supervisory relationships. One very wise psychiatrist remarked that he thought there was certain basic information volunteers had to have to work in a particular setting, but he pleaded that we not stultify creativity. He didn't want us to train the spontaneity and common sense out of volunteers because this was their particular unique value in the program. He did not want them to be second-rate professionals, but to keep their identity and perspective as volunteers.

Volunteers who stay with us are those who understand our ground rules and what we are trying to do. They want to participate in work toward our goals because they have internalized our goals. An important personal objective to them is understanding the goals we share. The kind of supervision that volunteers need must be the old-fashioned kind which social workers used to speak of as enabling. The expectations of the volunteer are made realistic, not freezing or frustrating about his work. We must expect to challenge, stimulate, and encourage the initiative in volunteers. A gradual induction process increases responsibility as they demonstrate readiness for it. If we give them too little responsibility they will be bored and feel demeaned by the process. If we give them too much, they will be overwhelmed. Again, the professional skill involved is a balance between two extremes.

Avoiding assumptions which determine our behavior without our being aware of them, in our work together we can control and very consciously develop explicit descriptions of our mutual responsibilities. Defining congruency, contiguity, and the outer limits of each set of responsibilities makes staff clear about what is expected of them and volunteers clear about what is expected of them. Both understand when they are supposed to be working together and when they are working independently. These areas may shift so we have to review and revise and renew these definitions periodically and be aware of the need to shift as volunteers grow in capacity. Program emphases may shift, too. Realistic expectations by each person of the work of the other will facilitate their collaboration.

It is essential for free communication between staff and volunteers to schedule regular opportunities for individual consultations, for mutual discussion, testing of ideas, redirection of efforts and adjustment of work loads. We are moving toward group supervision of volunteers because the group experience develops a sense of identity among the volunteers. The thinking of the whole group is valuable to all of the members in proportion to the degree each is given a chance to air concerns, share insights and solutions to problems. We remember best what we say at a meeting, not what we heard someone else say.

Another scheduled process should be an automatic review of the work being done, focussed not on the person in the job, but the work. Implications for the person in the job are there but it is much easier to readjust the work than to readjust the person. In the beginning, we worked with the person to develop common expectations which now can be used as a yardstick to measure accomplishments in a periodic work review. The work review may result in promotional opportunity for the volunteer, a regrouping of the tasks, cutting back some of the responsibility, or restating some of the objectives with new emphases as the needs are shifting and changing over a period of time. Review gives us the basis for real recognition of each person for his unique individual contributions, given through both tangible and intangible means.

DECENTRALIZED ADMINISTRATION OF VOLUNTEERS

As volunteer services grow, our administration may need decentralization. This means that the staff member responsible for volunteers will continue in the recruitment and orientation and in the development of volunteer opportunities for the volunteers. However, on-the-job supervision of the volunteer and the help which the volunteer may need as he carries this job, must be given by the people in charge of the area to which the volunteer has been assigned. The orientation becomes much more general, a ground rules approach to the field of service which the agency is engaged in, to the agency and its history and its ways of work and general policies. These may change from time to time and we may

have to bring volunteers back for reorientation as new services and policies are evolved. The actual job training, then, happens in the work area and is given as the need arises, sometimes individually and sometimes in groups.

Essential for the staff in the work area is skill in delegation, so that people are inducted into their responsibilities comfortably, experience success from effectiveness, and get some feedback about their worth early in their experience. They need satisfaction to grow and to build their capacity to carry greater responsibility. As time goes on this induction process will mean that the volunteer worker will need less and less close supervision. There will be a collaborative relationship with the people in the work area which can be very mutually satisfying.

The work review involves the supervisor in the work area, the volunteer and a report back to the Coordinator of Volunteers, stating whether this placement is to continue, the nature of any changes which have been decided on and the readjustment of the assignment if necessary. Overall recognition plans should be carried by the Coordinator and not decentralized. One of the best recognition plans I have heard about recently is the one in which the volunteers gave a recognition party to the staff who had helped them to enjoy their volunteer work so much.

BROADER PARTICIPATION BY VOLUNTEERS

You see, it is possible to get over some of the communication blocks and to develop patterns of work together which contribute to accomplishment of the agency's purposes and development and full self-actualization of the volunteers themselves. I think we are giving more and more recognition to volunteers who give service in direct relationships rather than to board members who used to get all the glory.

We are realizing the significance of volunteering as an expression of idealism in the volunteer. The vision which the volunteers have of how things ought to be is a measure for our services. We ought to tap this perspective as we evaluate our total services. Every day the newspapers feature the negative aspects of human nature. We don't read enough about the other side of human nature, in which volunteerism discloses human beings at their best, which makes working with volunteers such a satisfying job. I am very much concerned that we do not abjectly accept what newspapers say about people not wanting to be involved. They do, they just don't know how.

I would like to read to you from a book called *Reclaiming the American Dream* by Richard C. Cornuelle who develops the theory that the part of human nature which is motivated by ideals and concern for our fellow humans is not recognized in our social planning. He comments,

“The service motive seems weak only because we have failed to apply it to complex modern problems. We see it at

work only in simple 19th Century ways and this contributes to the illusion that the independent sector is unfit for modern responsibility."

"New vision in developing personal outlets for the service motive is desperately needed. Their decline sharply constricts the scope of the human enterprise, a man who only works and votes and pays his taxes is scarcely a whole man. 'Reverence for life,' says Dr. Schweitzer, in his persistent way, 'demands from all that they should sacrifice a portion of their own life for others.' But now, increasingly, we can help our fellowmen through middle-men, through remote political institutions. Lacking a direct outlet for our hunger to help others, to add the full dimension of meaning to our lives, we are frustrated and incomplete . . .

. . . The demand of the future is to release the idealistic will-power, as Schweitzer called it, which has been bottled up with such alarming human consequences. We need first of all to identify the force which can give direction to the untapped power of the service motive."

It is my firm belief that each of us here today represents an agency whose goals can be the force needed to give direction to the untapped power of the service motive. Thousands of persons need an opportunity to become volunteers, need to be givers as well as receivers in our world today, need some way of relating to their fellowman. Knowing that what they do makes a difference to persons and that it is important how they serve. If the agencies' services can be offered, they can play an essential part.

Each of us today has a responsibility to look at our own practices in the administration of the volunteer services in our agency, to be sure that every person who serves with us has a good experience, that he is working consciously toward our agency objectives, and that he has taken those objectives and made them his own. Together we can have the gratification of knowing that we have performed important tasks which supplement one another. The people who are performing those tasks each have a distinctive and unique contribution to make. We have to insure that these contributions are made available for our services.

CHANNELING PROFESSIONAL AND VOLUNTEER SKILLS TOWARD COMMON GOALS

As a social worker, I am concerned about the perspective which social work seems to have about volunteers: we take 'em if we have to, but not unless we have to. The parallel exists in other fields, and perhaps this example from industry will illustrate our situation.

One of the paper companies is aware that the process of making paper pollutes streams and the atmosphere around a paper mill. However, the company has a policy that it will conform with the laws and regulations as they are developed by the government, but it will not take any initiative about anti-pollution measures. This decision was made a couple of years ago and suddenly that company is waking up to the fact that the laws and regulations which are being passed by public demand are very uncomfortable for the paper industry because they are being made by people who do not understand how to make paper. If the company had been involved in the policy-making regulations, if they had embarked on their own research to find the most effective ways to control pollution, the means of control would be much more palatable to that paper company.

Our parallel in this as social workers involves the attitude of social work toward volunteers. The 1967 Harris amendments to the Social Security Act mandate volunteers in public assistance and child welfare programs which have never used volunteers before. The attitude of some of the people on those staffs is "if we've got to have them we will put up with them, but we will get just as little involved with them as possible."

The volunteers are going to be there and they are going to be concerned with what is going on. We will be much more effective in our total services if we "get with" the volunteers in our planning, thinking together on designs for services. As Mr. Cornuelle says, there is a tremendous power waiting to be tapped. We can either work with it or we can regard it as an outside force which we don't want to be involved with. The fact that it is powerful and it is going to become more powerful as time goes on is a fact of life today.

To me it is the hope of the future that volunteers are becoming more deeply involved throughout our programs. We are all going to benefit from what they can bring. We need this power source to solve the overwhelmingly serious and comprehensive social problems which we face today. Therefore, administration of volunteer services becomes the means we have for channeling this power, for directing this effort toward common goals rather than toward goals which will conflict with ours, which have been developed out of significant experience. It is up to us whether we will be with it or ag'in it and I think we had better be and are going to be, with it.