

# *Army Community Service: Another Kind of Volunteer Army*

By Joanne H. Patton

In the tradition of most volunteer-using agencies, as we have known them, the acceptance of the volunteer staff member as a "peer creation" -- and usually only after some years of growing pains, as both sides learned co-existence. In this pattern, the Army Community Service, an agency supported by and structured within the United States Army, stands as a notable exception.

The "ACS", as it is known informally in the service vernacular, was born of real necessity. It was the evolutionary brainchild of human services professionals within the Department of the Army, stemming from an inability of available military community resources to cope with the "people problems" which had begun to escalate during the post-World War II and Korean Conflict eras. Notwithstanding, the sincerity of the United States Army's tradition of "taking care of its own", the problems of its uniformed personnel and their dependents already were becoming unmanageable. Increased troop strengths of the Vietnam period would strain existing coping structures even further.

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As early as 1963, a particularly dedicated army officer, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Lieutenant General J.L. Richardson, took up the challenge and instituted initial steps toward establishing a full family services program for the Army. General Richardson appointed as his task force a WAC, Lieutenant Colonel Emma M. Baird, and an MSW social work officer representing the Army Surgeon's General's Corps, Lieutenant Colonel William Rooney. Both officers has experience in social services to military members dating back to Army Emergency Relief activities in World War II. They were therefore especially well qualified to accept the challenge of creating a plan for world-wide army operation. (Baird, 1979)

General Richardson and his team were well aware that without a cooperative streamlining of the multiple and sometimes unrelated social service systems, there was certain to be, even beyond the inadequate response to a soldier's needs, an erosion of his military efficiency and a resulting negative effect on the whole military mission. Building their design on that earlier AER operation, the team planned to utilize community agencies which already functioned under various auspices on some army posts, and to create others where none had been identified. Early attempts at obtaining Department of Army senior staff support for establishing a centralized program of community social services had not been successful. Nevertheless,

this trio of planners persisted, convinced that by funneling the problems which a soldier or his family member considered to be "beyond the scope of their own resources" (Handbook, 1972) through a single channel, enormous waste, personal stress and duplication of effort could be spared. They sought to establish central points of contact and referral which would be conveniently placed, easily identified by the client, and of course credentialled by the official command. Located on posts with a reasonably large Army Family population and at overseas stations, the centers would offer both general information and specific referrals, as individual and local needs dictated. The users would not be limited to post or base residents. Since most army installations are able to provide only limited housing in comparison with the needing families, those living off-post in civilian communities were also to be eligible. If no assisting program were available to meet a particular community need, the centers would be encouraged to provide them, if at all possible through their own resources. The aim was shortest distance between two points: the person with the problems and its solution or alleviation.

A social work core was considered essential to such a challenging operation and MSW-credentialled social work officers and trained enlisted social work specialists were to provide that. However, they were only expected to serve as "yeast" --representing the expertise needed for diagnosis and referral, but prepared to extend their service by training up a much larger volunteer corps to operate the bulk of the direct service programs.

The struggle to put Army Community Service into the military system finally bore fruit under the administration of General Harold K. Johnson. Long recognized as a "people person", the then-Chief of

Staff of the United States Army charged his personnel staff and social workers with putting their ideas to work, later gave their final proposals a "go", and in 1965 approved the publication of the Army regulation which defined ACS, a document affectionately known as "AR 608-1". With it arrived the first credentialling of the "community volunteer" as a member of the Army Team.

From the beginning, ACS volunteers were counted upon to carry out the bulk of program development and delivery in the new service. As the original governing regulation stated:

*"Major personnel support will be provided by organized volunteer groups of dependents" ... and*

*"The organizational concept of Army Community Service assumes a foundation of a volunteer corps composed primarily of army wives or other adult dependents."*

*(AR 608-1, 1965)*

In another agency setting, this might have created a serious problem. It is significant that the Army felt it could take such participation for granted -- correctly, as it turned out. As a measure of official recognition of the quality of that participation over the interim years, the latest revision of that military regulation reads:

*"The foundation of an effective ACS Program is a Volunteer Corps."*  
*(AR 608-1, 1978)*

The reasons for the Army's anticipation of voluntary support from the Army wife were several. First, there was tradition. Beginning with the frontier wife of the late 1800s (or even possibly her ancestress, the Revolutionary War camp follower!), her military community was isolated by geography (and sometimes politics) from that a civilian citizen. Whatsoever the nearest civilian help-resource

might be (and for the border and Indian-fighting armies these were seldom within easy travel distance), the majority of the posts were obliged to help themselves. There are innumerable memoirs and journals which document Army life in the Indian territories, most of them written by officers' wives, by far the predominant distaff group on hand in the largely-unmarried Army of those days. (Custer, 1971) These women along with their "sisters", the courageous, camp-following laundresses (some, but not all, married to troopers) served as nurses, midwives, recreational directors, marriage counselors and all-round emergency samaritans, wherever they were. (DA pamphlet 608-28, 1971).

Although the following years, from the 1880s into the first half of the 1900s, brought military families into closer social contact with civilians, the basic national philosophy of separatism kept the two apart in human services. Indeed, the size of the married Army (except during shared World War II) in no way created the "spillover" of human social problems which proliferated to crisis stage in the Vietnam years with their attendant military population increases. Until that time, the "good Samaritan" wife-volunteer, coupled with the simplistic trio of "answer-men", the Medic, the Chaplain and the JAG (Legal Officer)" were supposed to cope, and presumably did. With Vietnam, all of that changed.

There were motives other than isolation for earlier Army wives to volunteer in their communities. In the "olden days", certainly the wife was expected and accustomed to play a certain role as her husband's mate. Her career was, in truth, his career, for even if she were inclined to independence, the transience of her life, the powerful social mores and the unavailability to her of employment within the military setting hardly encouraged an alternative. The wife who

was a good helpmate to her spouse might not have helped him to promotion, but she might well have kept him from it in former times by insistence on her separate career which would dictate their lifestyle. Nevertheless, there was unquestionably a pervading service tradition, emanating from the early days, of "Duty-Honor-Country" -- a motto which served to inspire many a military wife living through the inherent vicissitudes of an often arduous military career to "do her part" as her inherited responsibility, just as her husband was supposed to do his. Was this "giving" at all self-serving? Because it was expected of her, perhaps; especially if she were trying to be the Perfect Army Wife. But there is no question that there was a frontier spirit of "the Army Takes Care of Its Own" at work, throughout.

A February, 1980 issue of an Army Wives' publication speculates:

*Why has the Army wife always been a volunteer? Perhaps because she really is special. Maybe she does have an inner resource which responds to the needs of others -- maybe she has a certain sensitivity which alerts her to service areas others overlook -- maybe she feels more deeply about her community and country because of her husband's vocation. Whatever the case, the Army wife has always been quick to say, 'I'll help' or 'I can do that' or just plain 'yes' to the familiar 'Will you?' (Leach, 1980)*

Whatever the reasons for the Army wife's participation, the Army Community Service rested on that as its strong base in 1965, and it rests and builds on it today. In 1980 there are 162 community services centers located on Army posts in the continental United States and at military locations overseas. In a very few are there substantial paid professional staffs. Even in the largest, the military social work

work officer, his corps drawn down by the deminishing numbers of the post-Vietnam army and reassigned, for the most part to higher priority military medical facilities, has all but dis-appeared. Waning from a peak corps of 49 officers in the 1960s, there are today only 10 MSWs in the ACS program, almost all of those serving overseas. Civilian hiring has replaced some, but by no means all, and those only when local military commanders have been able to rearrange hiring spaces and available funds to accommodate their positioning. During fiscal year 1979, the worldwide total of paid staff numbers working in ACS was 611. The burden of the program's direct service effort has without question, fallen to the volunteers. Today, these number over 5600 in the United States alone. Most continue to be servicemen's wives, but the door is open to any community member desiring to serve. Just as civilian voluntary agencies are seeing changes in the face and person of the traditional volunteer and are preparing to accept her augmentation, if not replacement, by the non-traditional one, so it is in the military community setting. The retiree from active duty (who often lives near a base in order to take advantage of its support services), the youth from elementary through graduate-student age, the off-duty soldier -- all of these are beginning to be a visible, positive statistic in ACS programs. In many ways, it is easier for the members of the service community to "come aboard" ACS volunteerism because of one distinct fact of their life: In the Army Community Service, the helper is the helped.

By definition of the ACS program, any member of its community is a potential client, as well as a potential helper. The client with a handicapped child being served in an ACS-sponsored recreation program, may be found serving as a trained budget counselor volunteer in the same agency. With a no-rank, all-ranks policy as to service given or received, the

Colonel may well be a client; the Private E-1's wife the desk intake worker who greets him on his arrival at the center. Volunteer committees are formed and operate without correlation between level of executive status and a spouse's military position. The reason that the system works, even in a military environment, is that the programs are created to be responsive to genuine needs and both clients and staff generally recognize this. The door to the agency is so wide, with so many services or links to services behind it, that there is little, if any stigma attached to a person's walking through it. A client coming in may be seeking any of numerous services. Some are formally mandated by regulation. Traditionally these have consisted of Information, Referral and Followup Services (maintaining files on local military and civilian social services agencies, processing cases to and through these, and checking on their situation later); Financial Planning and Assistance Services, (budget and consumer counseling and education, debt liquidation programs, Army Emergency Relief Assistance); Relocation Services (temporary loan of household items to those in transit without their own, orientations and welcome information packets for newcomers to a station, information on other posts, and assistance to families with special moving problems); Handicapped Dependents' Assistance (information on local and world wide services for the handicapped, referral and placement assistance for handicapped family members, coordination with military authorities in directing assignment of the military member accordingly, and provision of therapeutic recreational services when they are not otherwise available).

Within the past few years, two additional required services were added to the ACS responsibility: The Army Child Advocacy Program (promoting the welfare of children

by locating resources, educating parents, indentifying, reporting and managing cases of maltreatment) and Child support Services (insuring the existence of adequate, quality-controlled community resources to provide child care, family day care and pre-school facilities to meet the local needs, especially those of the single military parent, or both-parents-in-uniform families).

The scope of the required services is formidable. Nevertheless, they tell only part of the story of ACS. Optional programs which may be offered if local needs and resources are present often extend these. At most ACS Centers, one or more of the following may be found in addition to the essentials: Personal affairs counseling, "Hot-line" 24-hour service, baby-sitting lists, volunteer language translators, emergency food locker supplies, emergency child care, and others. A large center will have many "extra services", a small one a manageable few. If providing sophisticated service is not possible locally but is truly needed, the ACS network comes into play, with communication and referral assisted by other centers, by mail or telephonically. In cases where critical services needed by a client family may only be found elsewhere, reassignment of the serviceman or relocation of the family may be expedited through Army Community Service channels.

Who are the volunteer managers "enabling" all these services? One might identify them at several levels of the military hierarchy. Surely the local or Installation Commander who interprets the military mission and over-all directs his ACS within it is the most responsible figure in his area of operation. His support of ACS is essential to its effectiveness. The ACS Officer (who may be a civilian, a second lieutenant or even a lieutenant colonel) is the person charged with the direct administration of each center, its

staff and services. He/she, if funded staffing opportunities permit, may have a paid Volunteer Coordinator to whom supervision of the volunteer activities may be delegated. If not, his direct link with the volunteer corps is the next level executive manager, the Volunteer Supervisor, who serves without pay and oversees all the volunteer committees and their functions. In singling out "volunteer managers", one might even include the United States Congress whose "management" of the funds pipelined down the chain of military command frequently determines the extent of the services ultimately delivered!

Despite the layers of monitors, however, freedom of creative expression thrives in ACS volunteer programs and provides the lifeline and lifeblood to this community service. It is telling evidence that even the "hardboiled military" recognized the need for such creativity when one finds as the opening sentence of the officially published Handbook on Volunteers in Army Community Service, the following:

"Army Community Service (ACS) is a program that incorporates innovation." (DA pamphlet, 608-28, 1971) Heady language, indeed, for a military document! Nevertheless, there are countless examples of its sincerity, in creative programs sponsored by ACS in various locations, over the years. One of these was the formation at a Texas post several years ago of an ACS-sponsored group called "Parents, Professionals and Friends of the Handicapped". Operating from that broad, informally-associated volunteer base, it created a Child Development program which included worldwide information and referral for all handicaps, parent camaraderie and education, and a recreational panoply of offerings for the needing children themselves. Among these were bowling, swimming, Boy and Girl Scouts, ballet and art lessons, horseback riding, and of

course, the Special Olympics. The military establishment, the civilian neighbors (many of whose "special children" were able to share the recreational activities), and all aspects of the post community were involved. Specially-trained Girl Scouts provided baby-sitting for the handicapped youngsters when parents attended meetings at which professionals in the field were speaking; one retired officer created and donated a ballet bar to assist the orthopedically handicapped with walking lessons; two sergeants created special harnesses for the safety of disabled riders, while another built a ramp so that a young adult cerebral palsy victim could bowl competitively with just a flick of his wrist. A pair of married soldiers, assisted by an adult university student with severe locomotive disabilities, directed a softball team. A company Army of engineers refurbished a building for the children's indoor activities. Eventually, the chairmanship of the all-volunteer program passed from the wife of a General to the wife of a Sergeant, but the program continued to thrive.

At another ACS location, this time in Germany in 1977, the young wives of enlisted servicemen, searching for ways to make their United States pay dollar stretch in the disparate currency climate dominated by German mark, were encouraged to contribute handmade items to an ACS-sponsored "boutique". There, sold as gifts, they earned their creators tidy sums. In addition, the women operated a free one-for-one exchange shop, where anyone could donate one item and take home another of like value -- or even better! In addition to the regular budget counseling, nutrition and sewing lessons, and classes to assist the young couples in avoiding culture-shock in the new environment, these "extra-services" introduced them to the "caring" side of the Army, and to each other, as well as to volunteering.

The young women began to share some of their activities with a group of senior citizens who lived with their military sons and daughters. The seniors engaged in "parenting" the soldiers' wives while they concurrently received the welcome attention of the brides! Although both groups were under ACS sponsorship, they became, in time, their own "Enabling Volunteers".

The motto of Army Community Service is "Self-Help, Stability and Service", and all-encompassing but realistic goal. Despite the turbulence of the world in which the program operates and the transiency of its personnel which must be accepted as inevitable, it is succeeding in its purpose. As a key contributor leaves an area, a program necessarily is modified, but it seldom folds, particularly if the departing leader has been able to train successors. In 1980, the volunteer who leaves her post, not because her sponsor's military orders dictate but to go to work for pay, is an accepted fact of modern life. With ACS experience she often becomes employable in a related human services agency or field, albeit civilian. In this way, Army Community Service as a point of contact and referral stretches its resource network and, in addition, educates a larger public to its identity and purpose. Sharing of programs and knowledge can result, with both communities the richer for the exchange. In a recent paper on volunteers, in a section entitled "Looking to the Future", Harriet Naylor writes:

"The most crucial problem facing volunteers in the future may well hinge on economic realities. Service organizations may come to consider volunteers as primary-care givers."

ACS, of course, has always considered them that.

What about career development

possibilities for volunteer managers in Army Community Service? Because ACS as a career field is not a military specialty, few Army officers remain with it steadily throughout their service. The volunteer leader therefore has the greater potential for advancement within ACS itself, as it is almost always available to her as she moves from post to post. Increasingly, she is being encouraged by the military command to develop her potential and extend her role within the organization. Since funding for military social services undoubtedly will always be more limited than the human needs dictate, there is a conscientious effort on the part of the Army to husband monetary resources by stretching personal ones -- in this case, by improving the leadership training of the volunteer at all levels. These days, executive ACS volunteers may be found sharing studies with paid military and civilian staff colleagues at the intensive Army Community Service Course conducted at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana, and in both the Basic and Advanced-level Workshops in Volunteer Management held at the University of Colorado's Boulder campus. In addition, as increasing number of both paid and volunteer ACS staff members are seeking professional credentialing as Volunteer Managers under civilian auspices and with the blessing of the Army. As the volunteers, in particular, become better educated in their management skills, they are beginning to "write their job descriptions" for greater responsibility and are receiving greater trust from their superiors in the official Army network. Army Career Service volunteers are beginning now to make connection with civilian colleagues in the human services fields whose only thought when hearing "ACS" until now has been "American Cancer Society". The "connection" is long overdue. A 1978 comprehensive history of Americans as volunteers, (Ellis & Noyes, 1978) which devotes several paragraphs to examples of volunteer

gives no credit to any of the armed services for "in-house" community or family service, although each, in fact, has had for a number of years a program relative to ACS. Surely, social services enterprise saving the taxpayer as many thousands of annual dollars the recent fiscal year's 773,502 ACS volunteer hours represent would have been worthy of mention, had the authors known it existed! Moreover, the potential problems spared the civilian sector because of preventive or curative programs administered to the soldier's family before they leave the service should be reason for citing, if not encouraging, the military efforts in this direction.

In 1967, the late and well-respected United States Army leader, General Creighton Abrams, was quoted as saying, "Service is an affair of the heart". Although he was reflecting on his own military career whose hallmark was "devotion to duty", the same most certainly applies to the service of the ACS volunteer. In fact, General Harold Johnson, the Army's Chief of Staff in 1966, referring to the red heart superimposed on a gyroscope symbol in the brand new ACS logo, indentified it as representing the volunteers, "the heart of ACS". Perhaps the time will come when the general American public as well may discover that one of the greatest assets of the Volunteer Army today and in our country's future, is its corps of Army Community Service volunteers.

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