

Building Volunteer/Paid Staff Teamwork from the Top

By Joanne H. Patton, CAVS

In the Spring, 1981 issue of Volunteer Administration, Ivan Scheier challenged the field to recognition and even emulation of the best in "volunteer values."¹ In a practical sense, Dr. Scheier urged those of us on the volunteer management side of our house to put our actions where our words had taken us, by giving hard evidence that we believe what we so often have declared vocally to the volunteers we "enable": that they are the vital ingredient in volunteerism and are our worthy colleagues in service.

As an ombudsperson in volunteer administration, I feel I must speak to the point Scheier has made. My perspective comes from a background of volunteering in many military (and some civilian) communities for over twenty years. At the conclusion of my "active military duty" (the result of my spouse's retirement and our subsequent relocation), I was serving in two pioneer appointments for separate though related national agencies, as a senior executive volunteer in the headquarters of these organizations. In both cases, initiation of the appointments had required courage on the part of top management (taking a chance on a volunteer) and on the part of the volunteer (gambling that her own competency would pave the way for others, not

endanger their prospects for escalating volunteer responsibility). Of course, the volunteer selectee's credentials were sound: appropriate documentation of accrued experience within the organizations, proven leadership ability at escalating levels, and evidence of creative accomplishment in past shared teamwork with paid staff. It is important to affirm that this volunteer's record was not unusual, but the recognition and utilization of it by top management was, and unfortunately it still represents a minority story in volunteer-using agencies.

By mid-1981, because the experimental appointments had been judged successful after a year's trial, they were established as permanent positions in the two organizations. This step telegraphed an important message to their corps of volunteers: "You count -- you are recognized as key members of the organizational team." The two volunteer executive positions are not, however, identical and the implementation of lessons learned during their trial tenures has been made in separate ways. Therefore, it seems appropriate to elaborate on the experiences, as case studies for the information of our field.

I. At National Headquarters, American Red Cross:

National Volunteer Consultant Services to the Armed Forces

The Services to the Armed Forces (SAF) of the American Red Cross was a service in financial trouble. The problems of stretching available contributed dollars in order to cover all Red Cross commitments from health care to disasters required emergency measures. Reluctantly, the Red Cross Board of Governors took the step of ordering the reduction of paid personnel assigned to SAF, as it represented the largest budget of any Red Cross service. As a result, restructuring of the entire paid-staff force in SAF was undertaken, but the

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"bottom line" being removal of paid staff from some field stations, and the conversion of these positions to volunteer staff under long-distance supervision by paid staff elsewhere. Many field staff members and local military commanders cried: "Impossible!" -- and so it seemed. Nevertheless, over the succeeding year the transition was effected, and the traditional chartered services to the military are continuing.

Although the newly-evolving system is not yet totally in place and cannot quite be declared an unqualified success, indications are strong that it will succeed, largely because of the Red Cross emphasis on teamwork and peer-relationship building between paid and volunteer staffs. One evidence of this was the creation of a headquarters position entitled "National Volunteer Consultant, SAF," utilizing a volunteer with both military and Red Cross background as an ombudsperson. Other follow-through actions also demonstrated concern for teamwork:

1. Giving the National Volunteer Consultant direct access to the National Chairman of Volunteers and to senior SAF paid-staff executives, just as if the volunteer were holding a comparable paid position.
2. Appointing the Volunteer Consultant to the Board of Selection charged with evaluation of all SAF paid staff and with creating the new team of clustered District leadership responsible for overseeing individual stations within their districts. (The Board also was responsible for nominating field station directors throughout the SAF system.)
3. Including a qualified volunteer appointee within each leadership staff team at the District level, to work in peer relationship with the other three (paid staff) team members.
4. Establishing a check-and-balance system of accountability and evaluation of volunteer leadership, giving both a volunteer overseer and a paid supervisor opportunity to contribute input to the record of service (called "work performance review").
5. Centralizing the service records of leadership volunteers in SAF (whose operations stretch worldwide), thus enabling national headquarters to monitor and track the location of the often transient volunteer talent and expertise (due to military spouse re-assignments). Another follow-through action: drawing the attention of receiving station directors or higher staff to the arrival of a proven volunteer leader in their area.
6. Including volunteers with paid-staff attendees at District team training and conferences, and incorporating volunteers on training and teaching teams addressing the paid staff/volunteer student group.
7. Under the chairmanship of the SAF Volunteer Consultant at National Headquarters, convening a regular monthly meeting of paid and volunteer administrators from that headquarters, whose activities impacted on Services to the Armed Forces. (This resulted in improved networking for the entire SAF program, as well as in enhanced status for the volunteer executive leader.)
8. Including the Volunteer Consultant in meetings with other agencies in which the field of military community activities was the main topic.
9. Allowing senior volunteer executives to represent the agency in SAF matters, when appropriate.
10. Changing the title of the trial position of "Volunteer Consultant" to the now-permanent "National Chairman, Services to the Armed Forces," and giving this Chairman subordinate Volunteer Consultants representing each of the military services, thus creating an even more direct link to the separate service communities.
11. Appointing a Vice Chairman, SAF, for Administration, also to operate out of National Headquarters, to insure the full attention necessary for effective record-keeping and communication procedures, top to bottom, in the SAF volunteer network.
12. Requiring that senior management volunteers be nominated to their positions from field leadership, their records substantiated, and their appointments confirmed by national headquarters management in coordination with volunteer executives, when their service justified such promotions.
13. Insuring "quality control" of volunteer leadership, as with paid staff, recognizing the volunteer's ability to achieve, but also to fail to achieve, and accepting no compromise with necessary standards for the promised delivery of services.

II. At Department of Army, Office of the Adjutant General:

Volunteer Consultant,
Army Community Services

The American Red Cross had utilized volunteers at its National Headquarters level (although not in Services to the Armed Forces) prior to 1980, but the Army had not. Therefore, the prospective ACS Volunteer Consultant, Department of the Army, not only found it necessary to "lobby" for the creation of her position, but needed also to define (and further refine) her job description as she served in it. She concentrated on working with paid staff in close harmony from the beginning, in order to prove herself useful and not threatening to the system. While she was learning to work within the upper-level military command and administrative structure, she also needed to get to know her volunteer constituency and to establish with them her commitment to serve in their best interests. Consequently, it was decided that an information and opinion survey should be administered to the senior volunteer leaders operating at the ACS centers worldwide. Although each had a military or civilian officer responsible for their supervision, many were located at great distances from that direct source of help (not unlike the ARC Field stations which are all volunteer).² Therefore, it was deemed important to give these volunteers a firm assurance that "somebody up there was listening."

In June 1980, a letter was sent to all Army Community Service Centers on the official roster: 162, including 72 located in Germany and 19 in other areas outside the continental United States. Addressed to the senior volunteer leader at each center (the Volunteer Supervisor, in most cases), the letter requested a reply to questions on a personal, short-answer data form (designed to elicit a statistical picture of the leader volunteers in ACS) and a list of "issues for discussion" (all previously determined by the Volunteer Consultant and staff team at Department of Army to be major concerns of the ACS volunteer field) for respondents' narrative reply. Allowing for overseas mail delays and responses to reminder mailings, the survey was closed for tabulation five months later. Eliminating those stations which were found to have no volunteer operation currently, the 72 respondents represented a healthy 41% of possible replies, a percentage considered quite high enough to provide a valid sampling for the primary aim of the survey: an assessment of the senior volunteer leadership in ACS worldwide at that time and, through their expressed views, an identification of the primary concerns of the total volunteer corps in Army Community Service. The findings included some interesting revelations.

Although these were the top-level volunteer leaders in a program which was fifteen years old, most had been in their positions less than six months and over half had only one to three years' service in ACS. Half of the respondents from USAREUR (Germany) stations listed Basic Orientation as the highest level training they had received in ACS. At the same time, nearly half of those responding from the continental United States (CONUS) had attended either the ACS Course (an intensive ten-day professional training program conducted for military and civilian paid-staff leaders and volunteer supervisors) or the Volunteer Management Workshop at the University of Colorado, Boulder. The highest indication of recognition for ACS service that most had received was the ACS Certificate of Appreciation (a local option individually approved by local agency officers). Most of the volunteer supervisors were anticipating a move away from the present location within the next year, but nearly one-third of the respondents located in the CONUS said they were "retired" (meaning they or their spouse were no longer on active military duty) and stabilized. When asked to cite the training, education or experience which had helped them most as volunteer leaders, most listed volunteer work with other agencies, followed by general experience as a spouse or parent in the Army life. At the same time, the cumulative list of specific practical skills-training which the respondents listed surpassed all other references, if taken as a whole.

In expanding on issues "for discussion," the volunteer supervisors claimed, for the most part, to have read and used the existing volunteer handbook -- but did not find it being used as reference by their volunteers. They suggested the need to update the contents of the several-year-old publication, especially the section on Recruiting, taking into account the changing nature of the volunteer field. Reflecting agreement with the recent Gallup Poll, a number of reasons were cited for individual commitment of these leaders to their volunteer activity in the future, suggesting that there is no sure formula. However, "helping others" was the leading specific reason given, with a fifth of the respondents declaring that their commitment was so firm that nothing further was needed to keep them in ACS! Nearly half of the respondents, despite their obvious lack of tenure and training for the job, declared that they felt themselves ideally placed in the organization in their present positions.

When discussing the need for time-limits on their work, most indicated apprehension about "burn-out" if they were over-used. At the same time, two-thirds indicated willingness to serve as consultants to other centers or areas of ACS, if their special skills could be of help to colleagues or to the overall program.

A great deal of detail was given in the narrative answers to a critique of the ACS volunteer uniform, with specifics so numerous that a mandate for change was clear.

Very important, of all types of recognition awards the volunteer leaders valued, "public recognition" was the most frequently indicated. When encouraged to suggest other forms of appreciation which could be of incentive to further volunteer service, the most requested by far was "command support," accompanied by a great many suggestions for how commanders could give evidence of this which was meaningful. The real sense of the respondents' message seemed to be: "You say you support us -- now prove it!"

In summary, the ACS volunteer supervisors who participated in this survey (remember, almost all themselves volunteers) were willing to make a major commitment to the Army Community Service program and its goals, provided they, their contributions to the Army's welfare, their expertise and their dedication were given recognition by "the command" (for our purposes, "management") at all levels, as a serious, professionalized contribution to the Army's (or company's) mission. They sought the supports they felt necessary to permit them to do the job of which they were capable: to include appropriate training, funding and staffing supports, and official, public credentialing of their corps as a full-fledged part of the Army's team.

The ACS Volunteer Supervisor Survey³ created a springboard for many subsequent actions by the Army which resulted in a strengthening of its whole Army Community Service program. The results included these:

1. The creation of a volunteer consultant corps with placement (after carefully screening nominations from agency superiors) of volunteer leaders in positions of executive status at each key level of military headquarters, as consultant-advisors to the military chain of command.
2. Encouragement of improved orientation and training for both paid staff and volunteers, through an ongoing cyclical training plan.⁴ The program would operate at escalating levels of competence to address the volunteer (and paid staff) training needs as specifically as possible, from basic entry to top management.
3. Seeking volunteer input in revising regulations affecting Army Community Service, and in updating the ACS Volunteer Handbook.⁵

4. Integrating volunteers with paid staff in teaching teams at conferences, workshops and official courses.
5. Including volunteers in staff conferences such as their executive status might have included counterpart-level paid staff in the past.
6. Inviting participation by retired, or non-working, volunteers with specific, credentialed talent and ACS experience, to serve in a new corps of volunteer field consultants. (These consultants would be available for assignment by senior management to assist ACS programs on an ad hoc basis. As the volunteers were willing to donate their pertinent skills, they might be asked to give phone consultations, participate in training, or make field trips.)
7. A complete re-evaluation of the volunteer uniform, with a subsequent recontracting to manufacturers able to improve quality more economically and with the addition of optional items which increased versatility and appeal to the volunteers. (These actions accommodated greater size ranges and recognized the fact that volunteers include male and teenage members these days.)
8. An addition of insignia which could indicate numbers of hours served in large round-number increments (a high priority of volunteers revealed by the survey), and new pins identifying senior volunteer executive status (i.e., Volunteer Consultants).
9. Insuring recognition of volunteers with suitable awards, sponsored locally, by senior headquarters or by Department of Army, as appropriate.
10. Recognition of the need to professionalize the volunteer field by encouraging the participation of volunteer leaders and key paid staff in volunteer management courses conducted under civilian and military auspices, and in becoming active colleagues of related civilian voluntary and volunteer-using agencies.

These two examples from the author's recent experience, only superficially described in this article, offer positive evidence of paid staff or, better, volunteer administration response to volunteers' need for acknowledgement of volunteer worth. Without implying any denigration of basic altruism, the wise volunteer administrator will recognize the

importance to the volunteers of knowing that their service has value to those who supervise their actions. Of overriding importance, of course, is the volunteers' service to clients within the mission parameters of the organization. But the agency administrator whose position makes him or her able to evaluate the results of such volunteer service owes it to the unpaid staff members and to the field of volunteerism to give the servers proof of how valuable they are. Once volunteers have received "seals of approval" for their contributions such as I have enumerated in this article, they will almost certainly project an improvement in morale, followed by a strengthened commitment, a "second wind" restored, and an enthusiasm for their future as our colleagues --teamed in volunteer service. My personal gratitude goes to the American Red Cross and the Army Community Service for setting such an example.

Footnotes

¹Scheier, Ivan, "The Imitation of Volunteers: Towards an Appropriate Technology of Voluntary Action," Volunteer Administration, Vol. XIV, No. 1 (Spring, 1981), pp. 1-6.

²Patton, Joanne, "Army Community Service: Another Kind of Volunteer Army," Volunteer Administration, Vol. XIII, No. 2 (Summer, 1980), pp. 2-9.

³Army Community Service Volunteer Supervisor Survey 1980, prepared under the auspices of HQDA, (DAAG-PSC), Washington, D.C. 20310.

⁴Patton, Joanne. Army Community Service Training Program, prepared under the auspices of HQDA, (DAAG-PSC), Washington, D.C. 20310.

⁵Department of the Army Pamphlet No. 608-28, Handbook on Volunteers in Army Community Service, Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C., August 1971.