



Budget Cutting and Volunteers

Why is the manager of volunteers one of the first to go?

Susan J. Ellis

It is both logical and ironic that, whenever the specter of decreased funding looms greatest, political and organizational leaders speak of volunteers as one solution to the crisis. Logical because volunteers are usually cost-effective in the delivery of services. They are never "free labor" but always of greater value than the hard cash necessary to support their work. Ironic because turning to volunteers in bleak financial times is usually too little, too late.

Volunteers are one important component of an agency's resource mix. In times of surplus and in times of want, executives must consider the raising and allocation of diverse resources, including volunteer participation.

When one considers that "volunteer" services today include student interns, court-ordered workers, workfare participants, pro bono professional projects, and even stipended AmeriCorps workers, the potential for tapping this wide stream of help is enormous.

Those involved in the volunteer management field become understandably concerned when faced with any request to recruit volunteers to "replace" paid staff positions. But it is important not to let this resistance overshadow the valid impulse to do whatever is necessary to assure continuity of client service.

How should an agency approach volunteer involvement in the midst of possible budget cuts? There is a right way and a wrong way.

The wrong way

Turning to volunteers when the budget is strained is hardest if an organization never cared much about volunteers until funding was jeopardized. Those agencies with long-time, strong volunteer programs are in the best position to adapt to changing times. It takes money (and time) to start from scratch.

Assuming the existence of a volunteer program structure, has the agency created the type of program that involves low-level "helpers" or truly-skilled staff "partners"? If volunteers are to make a substantial contribution to client service, they must be the most qualified people possible. No one is going to accept limits on professional staff if the alternative is the wrong people asked to do things for which they are unqualified.

Let's assume, however, that there is a volunteer program structure and that volunteers already represent a range of skills and backgrounds able to provide quality service. Even in this scenario, it makes no sense to suppose that volunteers can simply "fill in" if staff positions are eliminated. Here are just a few reasons why not:

- Almost by definition, volunteers are hourly workers who neither have nor want to give the time necessary to handle full-time responsibilities. So expecting volunteers to cover even one 40-hour job slot may require as many as 10 volunteers each week.

- The current trend is for volunteers to prefer short-term, goal-oriented assignments. Again, this is just the opposite of the agency's need for continuity and consistency over many months and years.

- Even if an organization can recruit a team of 10 volunteers to "cover" a week-long position, these 10 individuals will not blend into a seamless whole. This means peaks and valleys of service delivery — not to mention the variety that results from volunteers ranging in age from 14 to 96!

- If volunteers are to be found, it is necessary that someone recruit and interview them. If volunteers are then to be effective in their work, someone has to orient, train, schedule, and (most time-consuming of all) supervise them. In short, the more volunteers an organization wants, the more funds must be expended to coordinate and support them. Paradoxical, but true.

- It is not enough to get volunteers in the door. They then need to be nurtured so that they stay. And, even in the best cases, there will be turnover in volunteers, so the process of recruitment and training is ongoing.

All of which raises the fascinating question: Why do so many organizations eliminate the director of volunteers position in a budget crunch — just when their demand for volunteers is likeliest to grow?

The right way

It is indeed possible to recruit more — and more qualified — volunteers in a budget crunch, but the challenge begins with the job design of all remaining employees. When some positions have to be eliminated, or when new projects are needed without new staff to run them, start by doing a task analysis of each employee's current job. Also analyze any jobs lost. Answer the following questions:

- Which tasks need to be done every day or at a very specific time? Which must be completed within a period, but could be done any time someone has a moment?

- Which tasks require the professional skills of this employee? Which are important, but do not need formal credentials?

- Looking at everyone's task analyses, are there items that seem to show up on everyone's list?

- Which tasks need to be done alone and which could be shared? Are there tasks that might be delegated if the employee supervised the results?

Clearly, the answers to these questions begin to frame assignments that are legitimate — and possible — to give to volunteers. But the first thing that has to happen is that the remaining full-time employees redistribute among themselves those tasks that

require continuity, specific time frames, and special training. Everyone keeps some tasks, takes on new ones, and gives up others. Volunteers then receive roles that support the new employee roles.

Here's a real example. A court's probation officers insisted that all their work was "professional" and volunteers could not do any of it. After a task analysis, it became clear that every probation officer began each day by telephoning school attendance staff to check on client truancy. So volunteers were recruited and trained to make these calls, asking about all clients at once.

The schools were delighted to stop fielding multiple calls each morning, probation officers gained at least half an hour each day for more professional work, and volunteers knew they were doing something valuable. Win-win-win.

Thoughtful executives will indeed consider volunteers in their resource development. But simplistically trying to substitute volunteers for lost employees is exploitative and won't work.

Success lies in careful delineation of staff and volunteer roles, coupled with the best support for part-time volunteers. Then people will be happy to give their time to do things in which they believe — including protesting to legislators and funders that you deserve more money!

Susan J. Ellis is president of Energize, a Philadelphia-based training, publishing and consulting firm specializing in volunteerism.
