

By Susan J. Ellis

Creating Great Volunteers

Want the most from
your volunteers?

Train your staff on how
to supervise them.

Engage any group of volunteer program leaders in a discussion of training and two distinct areas of concern will emerge: How to assure that volunteers are trained to carry out their work most effectively and how to prepare employees to supervise volunteers. In practice, the second training question comes first.

It is a general truth that very few professionals receive formal classroom education in how to work with volunteers. In fact, volunteers are the invisible human resource subject—despite how many nonprofit agencies involve volunteers in service delivery (not to mention on their boards of directors). The unfortunate implication of this silence on the subject of volunteers is that there is nothing to say! So social workers, nurses, curators and others leave school with advanced

degrees but a gap in their learning.

Then they find themselves on the job, confronted with a volunteer co-worker, and are unsure of how to collaborate. And so well-meaning staff members muddle along on instinct, drawing from their personal experiences as a volunteer somewhere else to guide them in supervising this volunteer now. Is it any wonder that the training topic most requested at volunteer management seminars is dealing with the tension between employees and volunteers?

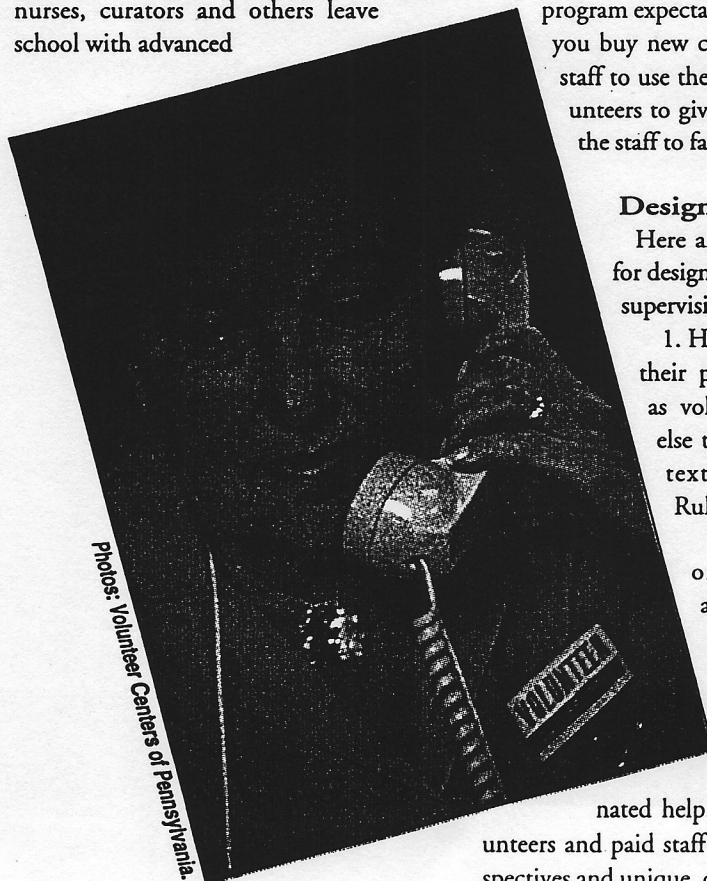
The primary recommendation for any agency seeking to strengthen the productivity and effectiveness of volunteers is to train the staff to provide support. Lack of such training sends a mixed message from administration: "We want volunteers, but we won't establish guidelines for you to work with them." Training reinforces program expectations. That is why if you buy new computers you train staff to use them. If you want volunteers to give great service, help the staff to facilitate it.

Designing Training

Here are some suggestions for designing staff training on supervising volunteers:

1. Have employees share their personal experiences as volunteers somewhere else to establish the context of the "Golden Rule."

2. Elicit a discussion of why volunteers are wanted in your organization, beyond "we don't have enough money so we have to settle for donated help." Explain how volunteers and paid staff bring different perspectives and unique, diverse talents.



Photos: Volunteer Centers of Pennsylvania.

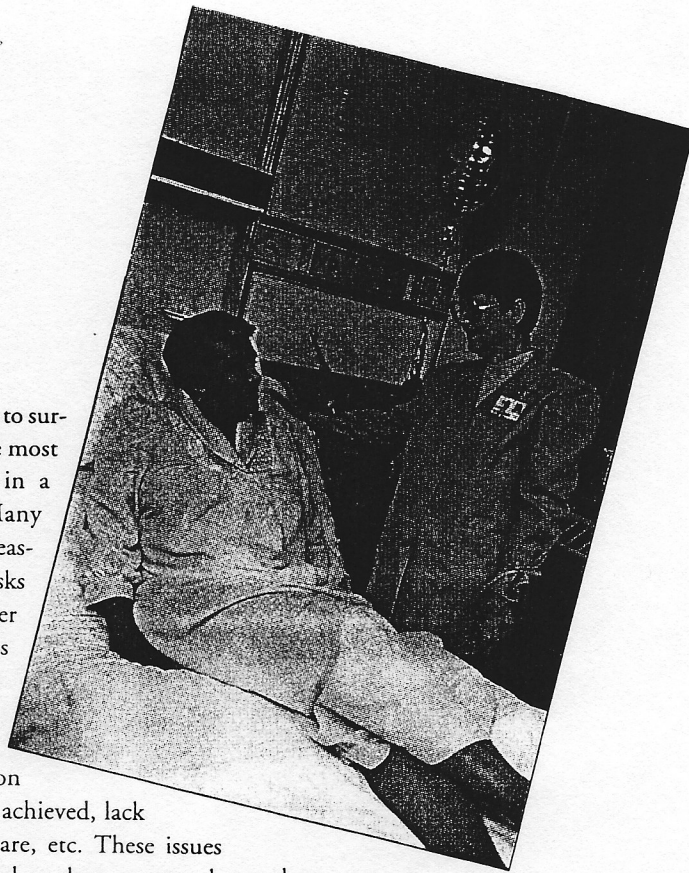
3. Allow negatives to surface. This may be the most important element in a training session. Many staff members want reassurance that their tasks won't be handed over to volunteers. Others may voice concern about dependability, confidentiality, the ratio of time spent on volunteers to results achieved, lack of work space to share, etc. These issues deserve discussion and, as they are vented, you will see people relax noticeably.

4. Discuss the similarities and differences between what employees want from a supervisor and what volunteers want. Not surprisingly, the lists will be quite similar. This is because work productivity is more a by-product of human motivation than salary level. However, next discuss what aspects of supervising volunteers may require some extra emphasis such as:

- ▶ Setting work into context since the volunteer is not on-site all week
- ▶ Accessibility to someone who can answer questions about the work to be done
- ▶ The need to have work prepared and a space to do it in
- ▶ Feedback, including a pleasant thank-you

5. Problem-solving should be next on the training agenda, perhaps as a "clinic" case studies. Have participants deal with such real-life questions as to what standards should a volunteer be held, what to do if a volunteer does something wrong, how to give constructive criticism, when and how to "fire" a volunteer, or how to use the director of volunteers as a liaison.

Issues will arise in this type of session that will identify areas needing a better articulation of agency policy. When you design training, you are forced to decide what you want and what you mean. Will



volunteers be held accountable? Whose job is it to fill in for an absent volunteer? How do we incorporate great ideas suggested by a volunteer into our planning? These and other questions underlie staff/volunteer tensions but reflect administrative indecision. A training session can therefore clarify a great deal for everyone.

This staff training can be done in a half-day format and should be repeated for new employees. Also, periodically set aside time at staff meetings to inform everyone about volunteer program developments and to discuss special volunteer-related questions.

Training Volunteers

Once the staff is better prepared to work with volunteers, you are ready to think about training volunteers themselves. There are three distinct needs: orientation, initial training, and in-service education.

Orientation involves everything any volunteer needs to know, regardless of assignment, in order to set the context for the work to be done. Apart from such obvious subjects as the history of the agency, a description of clients served, and a tour of the facility, spend some time doing the counterpart of the staff seminar just described. Do not assume that volunteers are any more knowledgeable about how to work

with paid staff than vice versa! Clarify the roles employees fill, expectations of volunteers, proper channels for voicing any concerns or positive feedback, and other "how we want to work together" subjects.

Use the orientation as a chance to explain what forms you will ask the volunteer to complete regularly, such as time sheets or reports. Also, go over some basic but important subjects such as how to use your telephone system (this is not as obvious as it may sound!) or procedures for snow days and other emergencies. If you have a volunteer handbook, go over it together rather than just handing it out for later reading.

Initial training is both job related and candidate related. The degree of training needed to start an assignment will vary with the complexity of the task and with the background of each volunteer. It is never an insult to provide some training—and no one is too experienced or too important not to benefit from some preparation. Even a corporate bigwig who has volunteered to develop your strategic plan deserves some information about your agency and problems you face, even if you can rely on the volunteer's knowledge of planning.

On the other hand, initial training should be reasonable. Serving on a suicide hotline may well require a twelve-hour series of seminars, but shelving books at a library might be taught "on the job" in less than an hour. Similarly, it is neither cost- nor time-effective to spend many hours preparing volunteers who will be helping for only a few weeks. So make assignments accordingly.

Give Good Instructions

Never underestimate the value of giving good instructions. Be sure that whoever is explaining a task to a volunteer really knows how to do the job and can describe it clearly, in a logical sequence of steps. Include an explanation of where to find necessary supplies. In some cases, your best training "plan" will be a written sheet of instructions—continuously updated with hints from previous volunteers. This type of sheet can be invaluable at one-day events involving many volunteers in specific tasks.

For both orientation and initial training you can call on experienced volunteers to share their reflections and pointers with newcomers. Form buddy teams to give individual support to new volunteers. Another idea is to call every volunteer, regard-

less of assignment or community standing, a "trainee" for the first few months. This sets up the right frame of mind for everyone: The volunteer is open to instructions and suggestions, and the staff feels comfortable giving them.

Once the volunteer begins to work, the line between training and supervision will blur. Feedback should happen naturally, with the employee acting as coach and mentor. It helps to remember that no one consciously volunteers to do a bad job. Helping someone to contribute the best service is one way to show that volunteers are valued team members.

Be sure work is prepared each time the volunteer comes in and someone is there to answer basic questions. Next time, let the volunteer know how his or her efforts contributed to the end results of a project. This type of good teamwork is effective whether the volunteer is assisting the staff, working independently with a client, or acting as an expert consultant.

On-going Education

In-service education can be done jointly for employees and volunteers, since such programs are usually more general in nature and keep all staff up to date on issues. For volunteers, ongoing training is a form of recognition and motivation. For those working off-site, periodic group sessions have the added benefit of reducing isolation and reinforcing commitment (though be prepared to deal with attendance problems).

Survey volunteers to find out what they would like to keep learning. Consider forming a training collaborative with other volunteer programs in your area, perhaps with all who serve a similar client population or need. Then you can rotate responsibility for planning and hosting monthly or bi-monthly sessions. You do less work but gain more workshops to which volunteers can be invited.

Employee and volunteer training are part of the spectrum of good volunteer program management practices. Prepare everyone well and they will be much more productive.

NPT

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