



Sidelines Or In The Center:

The role of the director of volunteer services

How would you define the role of a "director of volunteer services"? What function does this position fulfill for an organization? As nonprofit budgets are squeezed tighter and tighter, it is time to consider these questions carefully -- and with as few preconceived notions as possible.

Many people would define the role as a list of activities, as in "a director of volunteer services recruits, screens, places, and monitors volunteer workers."

"Although accurate as a work description, this set of tasks focuses on process, not purpose. It relegates the volunteer program office to a form of employment agency, perhaps specializing in temporary or part-time help.

There are many aspects of managing volunteer involvement that require personnel/human resources skills, but the scope of the office is much broader.

In various conference workshops across the country this spring, directors of volunteers were asked to pose this question to themselves: "What is it you do?" After they, too, enumerated their daily tasks, some dif-

ferent -- and more fundamental -- answers emerged:

- A director of volunteer services is a catalyst, energizer and organizer who creates a system in which good-hearted people

There is a clear partnership between community outreach for the purpose of donated time and talent and outreach for cash.

can be channeled into helping others.

- A director of volunteer services adds to the "resource mix" available to the agency so that services are stretched above and beyond what the dollar budget alone could cover.

- A director of volunteer services empowers people to fill needs. A director of volunteer services balances and matches the needs of the client/consumer, the organization, the volunteers, and the community.

- A director of volunteer services is an in-house educator about the ordinary and

extraordinary ways the community can be tapped to help meet needs.

Think about how these statements reflect on an organization's vision of the function volunteers fill for an agency, too.

A broad mandate

One way to think about the mandate of this position is that it has three elements: A director of volunteer services:

1. Proactively identifies the needs of the agency's clients, staff, public, or other constituencies; then
2. Applies good volunteer work design principles to craft meaningful, attractive, and flexible assignments doable by a wide range of people; and then
3. Mobilizes non-cash resources in the community to address the identified needs.

Let's examine these three elements individually.

Element No. 1 speaks to the role of the director of volunteers as someone who engages actively in thinking about and plan-

ning for the work of the agency. Too often volunteer job descriptions are developed only upon request of a staff member, placing the volunteer office into a waiting-to-be-asked, passive mode.

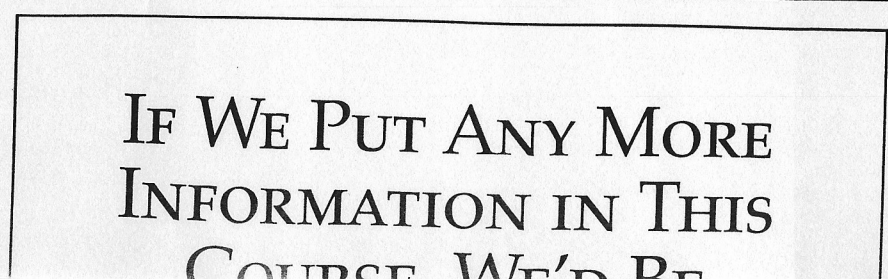
And, since many employees really don't want to be troubled with supervising volunteers, this approach tends to restrict work offered to either tasks no one else wants or last-minute crisis requests (as in: "You need five volunteers at 10 a.m. tomorrow? No problem. I'll just defrost a few from my freezer for you.")

Further, it is limiting to develop assignments for volunteers solely as helpers to the employees. Consider how effective community involvement can be if it starts with the much broader question: "What do our clients need that our paid staff is not going to provide, but that would add to the effectiveness of our service?"

For example, if patients fret about a neglected pet at home, nurses might sympathize but can do nothing about it.

An alert director of volunteer services, recognizing this patient concern, could either recruit "pet visitors" to feed and exercise pets or could arrange with a local animal shelter to provide the service in coordination with the hospital. Health care is enhanced but employees and volunteers

continued on page 36





ON VOLUNTEERS

continued from page 29

operate on separately designed tracks.

This type of creative thinking can occur only if the leadership of the volunteer office is included in agency planning meetings and has free access to evaluate all departments for such types of client needs.

The second element, volunteer job design, requires that the director of volunteer services understand the unique aspects of creating a realistic and motivating position description to address the identified need. This means excellent task analysis skills:

breaking an activity or workload down into discrete, sequential steps that can be completed in a variety of time frames and by a variety of people with different skills.

This is not easy. The tendency is to design volunteer work for the lowest common denominator, so as not to risk burdening a lesser skilled person with little time. But the true test of a capable leader of volunteers is crafting work that can be delegated successfully to the most capable people.

Finally, note that element No. 3 is carefully worded to avoid saying "recruit volunteers." Instead, mobilization of "non-cash community resources" is the strongest and most ambitious vision for the role of the director of volunteer services. This opens the door to a wide variety of assistance, regardless of whether it is labeled "volunteer."

The broader concept includes students doing required community service, participants in welfare reform projects, and col-

laboration with existing service clubs, faith communities, and other all-volunteer associations. The effective volunteer program does not worry about whether it recruits volunteers "for us." It does not matter if these people sign in on the agency time sheet or even consider themselves "your" volunteers. The key is that they have been mobilized to do a service that directly benefits your clients.

This is why it is useful to think of the volunteer program office as "people raising," in the same way that you consider the development office engaged in "fundraising."

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Increasingly, donors are seeking both opportunities. Corporations want to focus their employee volunteer efforts where their philanthropic dollars already go. Individual benefactors feel more connected (and generous) when they also have the chance to participate first-hand in the work of the agency. The lines between giving money, goods, in-kind services, technical assistance, time, extra hands and talent are increasingly blurry -- and interchangeable.

So, take stock of your attitude towards the volunteer program and its director. Do you see a bland "temp service" or a vibrant, resourceful, and integral component of client service and agency outreach?

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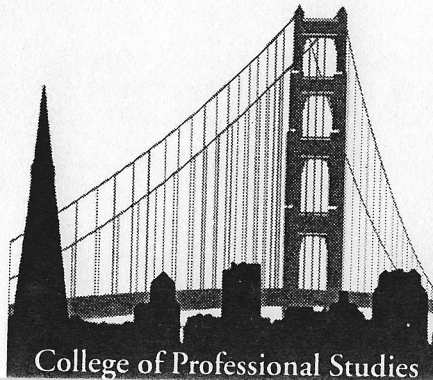
Editor's Note: An editing error in the July issue caused a misstatement in the "on volunteers" column. The statement should have been "volunteers should not be compelled to cross the picket line nor suffer later consequences whether they do or don't."



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