



# Volunteers And Unions

## *Guidelines help managers walk the tightrope*

Labor unions can be resistant to volunteer involvement. One way to lay the groundwork for good working relations is to clarify expectations. Here are some issues that deserve open discussion, ideally separate from contract negotiations.

1. Assurance that there is no intent to eliminate jobs. This fear is always present and mistrust cannot be overcome by words. But it doesn't hurt to keep emphasizing that volunteers are important even if there wasn't a budget crunch and that the introduction of a volunteer program is not a "back door" attempt to hold back employee development.

2. Concern that this will add new work to existing jobs. Yes it will. At least in the short term, employees will need to support volunteers before the contributions made justify the time spent by staff. The real issue here is changing employee job descriptions to reflect the expectation that staff at various levels will now have to work supportively with volunteers. This has to happen or you cannot hold staff accountable. The union may balk because this is something "additional." Emphasize that staff will participate in selecting work for volunteers to do that ultimately helps the staff, too. Also, you may need to acknowledge the time necessary to work with volunteers and reduce other expectations for some positions.

3. If there are budget cuts in the future, how volunteers will be incorporated into the plan to cope. Budget cuts are not a paranoid fantasy, so some honest talk is worthwhile. In a budget-cutting process, it is vital that all staff job descriptions be re-evaluated. Unions hate this point -- even without talk of volunteers.

It is OK to agree that volunteers will never be used to directly "substitute" for cut positions. This is highly unrealistic anyway, since it would take 10 or more volunteers to cover the full-time work schedule of an employee and the coordination headaches

make no sense.

If positions are cut, all remaining staff will have to redistribute their work and volunteers can be added to the mix to take on tasks that do not need to be done on a set time but are goal-oriented, can be delegated in small chunks of time; etc.

4. Recognize that the greatest "threat" is to the paraprofessional and clerical levels of staff. Especially because volunteers are perceived as "helpers," employees who assist professionals are the ones who will have to work most closely with volunteers and therefore wonder if their jobs are in jeopardy.

Few department heads, for example, will fear losing their jobs to a volunteer. The key, along with constant reassurance, is to note the wide diversity of assignments that volunteers will fill at every level of sophistication and training.

The union may also raise the issue that paraprofessionals and clerical people will be asked to supervise volunteers, something that is not in the job description or is a task that deserves higher pay. This may be a valid argument. You'll need to think it through. One response is that working effectively as a supervisor of volunteers is a training opportunity and that staff will indeed be evaluated on how well they do this -- which might lead to promotion at some point.

5. The union may want "approval" on volunteer job descriptions. It is critical to refuse this request. You can negotiate certain guidelines or parameters for volunteer assignment development, including not calling these "jobs," for example. What exactly are the tasks that must be done by the staff -- and why? Try to get the concession that there is a difference between doing a task directly and having the responsibility to see that it gets done.

Maintain the right to assess what

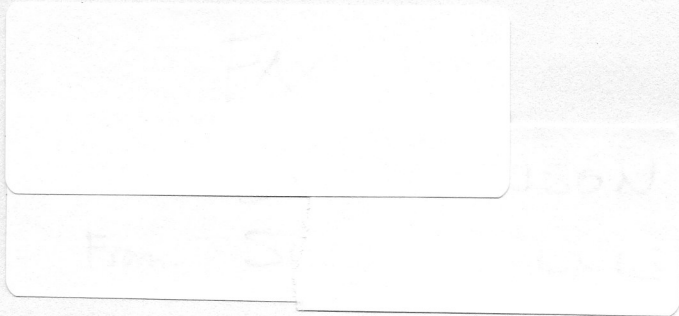
needs to be done and to mobilize community resources to meet those needs. This is the time to note that many volunteer roles will be created apart from employee roles -- not as "staff assistants," but as work to serve the organization's consumers in ways the staff never will.

Note that this may, in turn, raise union resistance to using volunteers in innovative capacities, on the premise that "you should be hiring staff to do it if the work is that important." Here is where you need to explain

the position that community involvement is important as an end unto itself. Volunteers feel a sense of ownership, loyalty, etc. that cannot be brought by employees alone. Fight for the right to be creative and innovative.

6. Development of a strike plan. It is legitimate and necessary to develop a contingency plan in case of a strike. Ideally, the time for this discussion is not during contract talks. This is best decided at a neutral

*continued on page 38*





# ON VOLUNTEERS

continued from page 33

time, when there are no immediate plans for protest. The kinds of things to include in a strike plan are similar as those for non-union employees and members of the public, including:

- Affirmation that volunteers will be permitted -- at their individual discretion -- to continue in whatever assignment they were carrying before the strike. Volunteers should be compelled to cross the picket line or suffer later consequences if they do not;
- Agreement not to recruit new volun-

teers during a strike;

- Agreement not to deploy volunteers in any action that "takes sides;"
- Discussion of what, if any, additional assignments volunteers might be asked to do during a strike. This is most relevant to life-threatening patient/client situations where volunteers may be permitted to feed people, for example.

7. Clarify who is a "volunteer." In the changing environment of the volunteer world, this should be noted. The point is

not to "ask permission" of the union, but to clarify -- in advance -- the scope of who might be involved in the program.

For example:

- court-ordered individuals;
- students at various levels and some "mandated";
- welfare reform participants;
- stipended workers such as AmeriCorps;
- loaned executives.

The union needs to understand that volunteers are not just low-level helpers, but also that they may come in with special needs. Volunteers with the skills will indeed be asked to fulfill professional assignments. This is not the same as doing someone else's job.

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

*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."*

NP Jones  
Sept. 1997

Should read:  
"should NOT be  
compelled..."

(see September  
correction)