

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Both Receiving and Giving

Both Receiving and Giving

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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In many of the organizations I know, volunteers are recruited from outside sources and often travel a good distance to come on site. And, they look a lot more like the staff than the clientele.

Conspicuous by their absence, particularly in human service agencies, are volunteers with a direct, personal connection to the work of the organization: recipients of service, their families and friends, or people in the immediate neighborhood of the facility. These are the folks the staff serves, and therefore are not considered as a source of talent themselves.

We have evolved a system that separates people, often because of the barrier of professionalism. Of course, trained, full-time paid staff are the primary service givers – that’s why they were hired. Yet the essential activities they perform are only a narrow slice of what the organization’s consumers need and want. If we truly work in *mission-driven* organizations, we should be trying to meet as many client needs as we can.

Nor should we perpetuate the old model of “charity,” in which those who have so much give to those who have so little. We should look to the receivers of our services also as potential givers – contributors to the services we provide.

It Starts with the Board

Consider who’s recruited to volunteer for most boards of directors. In a fledgling organization, the first board is, in fact, comprised of people who most resonate on the issue being addressed, often from personal experience. But over time and the larger the institution, the board becomes further and further removed from the client base. Corporate executives, wealthy donors, and key civic leaders are sought – not because they will necessarily make the best governance decisions, but because they may give or attract money.

I believe that an organization focused on a specific target population has a moral obligation to engage representatives of that population in planning and decision-making, both at the top and throughout

the system.

Some types of organizations are better at this than others. Women's groups, for example, would never permit a male-dominated board to lead their work. The disabilities community, too, is quite sensitive to the need for representation of their population. But how many youth-serving organizations allow someone under age 18 to serve on their board? Or how many senior-centered groups include someone over age 75 in governance? Many of the organizations battling a specific disease defer to medical professionals and researchers, relegating those *with* the disease to an auxiliary association of patients who can feel disconnected from and even at odds with the main foundation.

The donors and funders who give money and the recipients of an organization's services are rarely the same people. And, those who pay the piper choose the tune. Revenue is generated by impressing donors with service plans which might not really be what the recipients of service need or want. So it is important that service recipients have an avenue to communicate their wants, needs, and suggestions. Recruiting board members who represent the client perspective assures reality-based consideration of the organization's choices.

The Role of Volunteer Program Managers

As volunteer program managers, we are charged with implementing an organization's *volunteer involvement strategy* and should not be trapped by the limiting vocabulary of volunteer "program." We are well within the scope of our mandate to draw attention to any lack of representation on the board or elsewhere – and to lead the thinking about how members of the client base can be part of both decision making and service delivery. At a minimum, we can suggest volunteers as information gatherers, informally or formally surveying clients to get first-hand information about what else the organization can do for or with them.

Second, we need to see current and past clients and their families as prospective volunteers with time and skills to give as well as needs to be met. It may help to remember that people move in and out of recipient and giver roles, and can even be both at the same time in different places. The dialysis patient at the hospital might also be a teacher at the high school; the illiterate adult might nevertheless have a full-time job caring for residents in a nursing home. Just because you meet people as clients in need of the services your organization gives does not mean they are "needy" in every area of their life.

Let's consider some categories of clients-as-volunteers.

Self-help

Sometimes we encourage volunteering by clients as an attempt to foster *participation* to make our services more home-like or therapeutic. Other types of client involvement encourage ownership of the activity, support self-help, and reduce any feeling that the person is receiving charity. Self-respect

is thereby maintained while getting necessary work done. Some examples of this type of volunteering are:

- Chemotherapy patients organizing their own car pools and other shared support
- Teenaged students tutoring younger students in their own school
- Residents in a home for those with severe disabilities forming a program committee to plan special events
- Seniors in a nutrition center helping to set the tables before and clean up after their lunch

Vested-Interest Volunteers

Another group of potential volunteers is people with a special or vested interest in your work. This includes family members and friends of clients, who often are directly impacted themselves by their relative's or friend's situation, but perhaps feel powerless to help. Frequently overlooked as potential volunteers are older siblings of young clients. We all recognize the need to support parents if their children are in need, but no one focuses on sisters and brothers.

Do these relatives and friends have any idea that they can become volunteers if they wish? Have you ever issued the invitation? There's special potential with anyone dealing with a long-term issue that will require frequent visits to your facility and waiting around. Volunteering can offer the caregiver unexpected respite and support.

Of course you will want to assure that such stakeholder volunteers do not let concern for the welfare of their relative or friend overshadow the desire to support your work on behalf of everyone. Clarify roles, channels for voicing complaints (or praise), and other working relationships. When is the relative acting as a volunteer versus as a consumer? Are all relatives welcome as volunteers, or must they first apply and be accepted into the program? And so on.

Volunteers may have a personal interest in your cause, although they may not currently be "clients." For example, domestic violence programs often involve volunteers with personal histories of abuse. Performing arts centers may attract the donated services of performers themselves as volunteers. Again, the more defined the roles of volunteers, the less chance for conflict of interest and the greater the chance for wonderful contributions.

Instead of looking for potential volunteers on the other side of town, make an effort to invite people who live or work close to your location to get involved. You're neighbors, after all, and share a commitment to what happens in your own backyard. Being aware that your organization is working nearby does not necessarily mean your neighbors know that you are actively looking for volunteer help nor that you value their specific skills. Walk around your block and say hello!

The key in these scenarios is *choice*. Each person must participate completely voluntarily and should have as wide an array of service options as possible. It is choice that places such activity within the

realm of volunteering. Also, it is imperative that someone who does not wish to volunteer in no way jeopardizes his/her right to remain a recipient of your services.

Alumni

Finally, who may have received services successfully in the past but have never been asked if they would like to express appreciation for the help they received – and make use of their understanding of the experience – by helping current clients? Many Boy and Girl Scout troop leaders were troop members themselves when young; those who have overcome addictions later support newly recovering addicts; university alumni act as career counselors for recent grads.

Ironically, most development staff members see the connection between alumni and financial giving. The volunteer office should, too. If obtaining a former client list violates confidentiality, you have two options: 1) ask the records department to send a letter of invitation to alumni (that you write, of course); or, 2) simply conduct a special volunteer recruitment campaign along the lines of “seeking people who know first-hand what our clients are going through” and see who steps forward.

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Submitted 4 February 2010 by H. Roberts, Blankie Depot - Project Linus NJ, Keyport/NJ USA

Giving and receiving at our organization often goes hand in hand. Literally!

A good deal of our volunteers learn about the mission having been on the receiving end of a handmade blanket donation. Their own children or extended family members, coworkers or friends may have seen or experienced the impact a handmade blanket has on a child undergoing medical treatment, trauma or upheaval. A large number of our crafting volunteers are professional caregivers who work in social services, medical units and human resources. An even higher number of volunteers are healthy, active seniors who feel a strong alliance to helping the young through difficult health and wellness issues.

On the giving back side, we see a strong interest among youth volunteers participating in our "kids helping kids" programs through local school, service clubs and scouting. A growing area of giving in the last five years has been from urban schools and the working poor who want to make a positive contribution to their own communities and balance the perception of "hand out." We have found generally as volunteerism continues to reach a broader audience, a direct shift in the overall concept of giver and receiver changes. It's a positive direction when we collectively respond to the opportunity to pay it forward as both equal and inclusive.

Some of the ways in which we actively share the opportunity to give back include:

- answering emails and phones from first time recipient callers
- writing thank you notes to crafting volunteers

- delivering donations
- attending a knit, crochet or quilting workshop
- giving a presentation to potential volunteers
- distributing our agency brochures

Susan, I hope this month's Hot Topic encourages fellow VM's to open their doors and volunteer opportunities to clients and recipients of their unique missions in an appropriate and thoughtful way. Building trust and goodwill should be a mutual experience.

Submitted 3 February 2010 by Jennifer Miller

I am the Volunteer Coordinator at a Ronald McDonald House. We occasionally have guest families participate in our Family Meal Program by preparing a meal for all the House Guests. I feel it is an excellent way for some clients to give back. Of course we understand that not all of our guest families are able to do this and for that reason, we don't really recruit from this group. I would love to hear from other non-profits if they recruit volunteers from this demographic group.

Submitted on 3 February 2010 by Lynne Allebach, Volunteer Assistant, Souderton Mennonite Homes, Souderton, PA USA

In the long-term care facility where I work we have a long history of residents serving as volunteers. When new residents move into our independent living units I send a welcome letter and volunteer application. Twice a year the social worker in independent living hosts a new resident social and a separate new family social. These socials serve as an opportunity for residents and their families to learn more about the services available to them, and the opportunity to volunteer is one of the featured topics. We will also receive referrals from activities staff of people in other care units who have expressed interest in volunteering. We are fortunate to have volunteers from all levels of care in our facility.

Submitted 3 February 2010 by Sheila Livingston, GA USA

Quick question to someone who may know the answer: Our agency stopped using clients as volunteers when we were told that the client could have tax implications (they received something from us, i.e. utility payment or seasonal food/gifts) because their volunteering was seen as work earning the item(s) we supplied. I still work for this non-profit, but in a different position now. Although we don't want to admit it, there was also a problem with clients handling seasonal gifts - theft and attitude problems could ruin a day.

Response from Susan, posted 3 February 2010

Any time an organization gives volunteers something of cash value that is not a direct reimbursement for expenses incurred as a volunteer, there are tax implications. Recognition items and small gifts (say, under \$20 in value) are no problem, nor is providing food while the volunteer is on site (an accountant can answer specific questions for an agency). However, within your question are two issues that are about *volunteer management* in general – not about “clients as volunteers.” The first is that your organization seemed to set up client participation *as a jobs program* or income supplement.

If they did this because they thought no client would serve without some monetary compensation, they may have missed an opportunity both for your clients and for the agency. Had they acknowledged this as a jobs program, the accounting may have been different. The second issue is about the theft and attitudes. Is your organization of the opinion that every client is untrustworthy, or (which you imply) did they get rid of any and all client volunteers to protect against the few who couldn't be trusted? Sounds like no one designed the work client volunteers would do thoughtfully, screened clients for which of them would be truly suited to the work, or supervised them carefully. I can understand this all being a big red flag, but the organization threw the baby out with the bath by not trying to do things properly after they started by doing lots of things wrong. Again – don't blame the clients! (And I do not blame *you*, either – thanks for posting!)

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