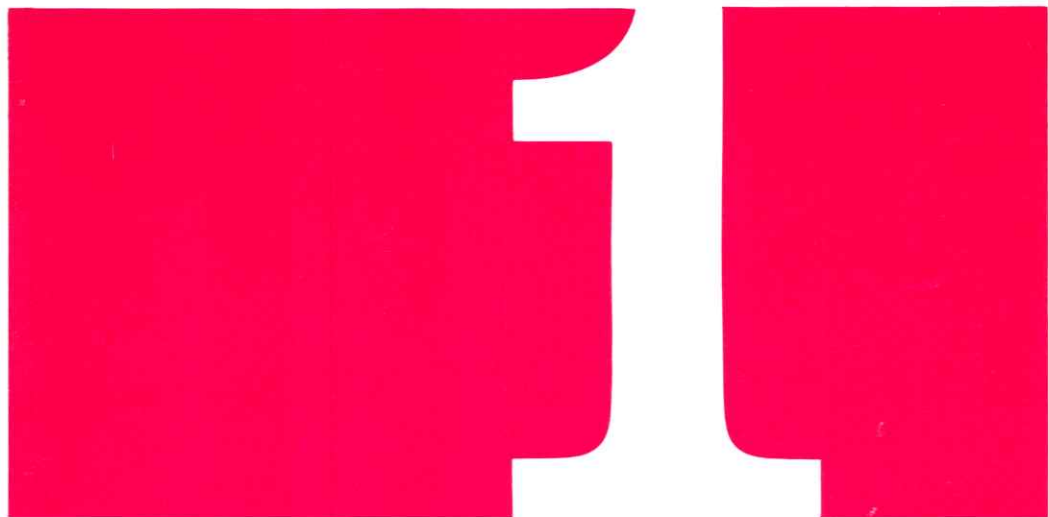




**The  
Volunteer  
Centre**

## **WORKING WITH VOLUNTEERS**



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**35p**

**Support**

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## INTRODUCTION

The four booklets in this series have been produced in response to many requests to The Volunteer Centre for guidance on working with volunteers—a subject about which much more has been said than written. We have tried to make our contribution as practical as possible. The breadth of the subject and the openness of the answers to some of the most relevant questions make it impossible to produce itemised how-to-do-it instructions, but we have included well-tryed advice and 'solutions' as well as conceptual discussion.

We hope that the series will be of use to everyone involved in work with volunteers, officially or unofficially, full or part time. Readers with experience in the field will be able to bring their own ideas and expertise to the questions posed and the real-life examples given; newcomers will find the booklets a useful introduction to a complex subject.

The authors and I would like to thank our colleagues and the board of The Volunteer Centre and the many professionals in the field who have contributed their valuable time and ideas to the content of the series.

**Ian Bruce**

*The Director*

The Volunteer Centre

October 1977

# **WORKING WITH VOLUNTEERS**

## **1**

## **Support**

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**WARREN REDMAN  
TRAINING ADVISORY UNIT**

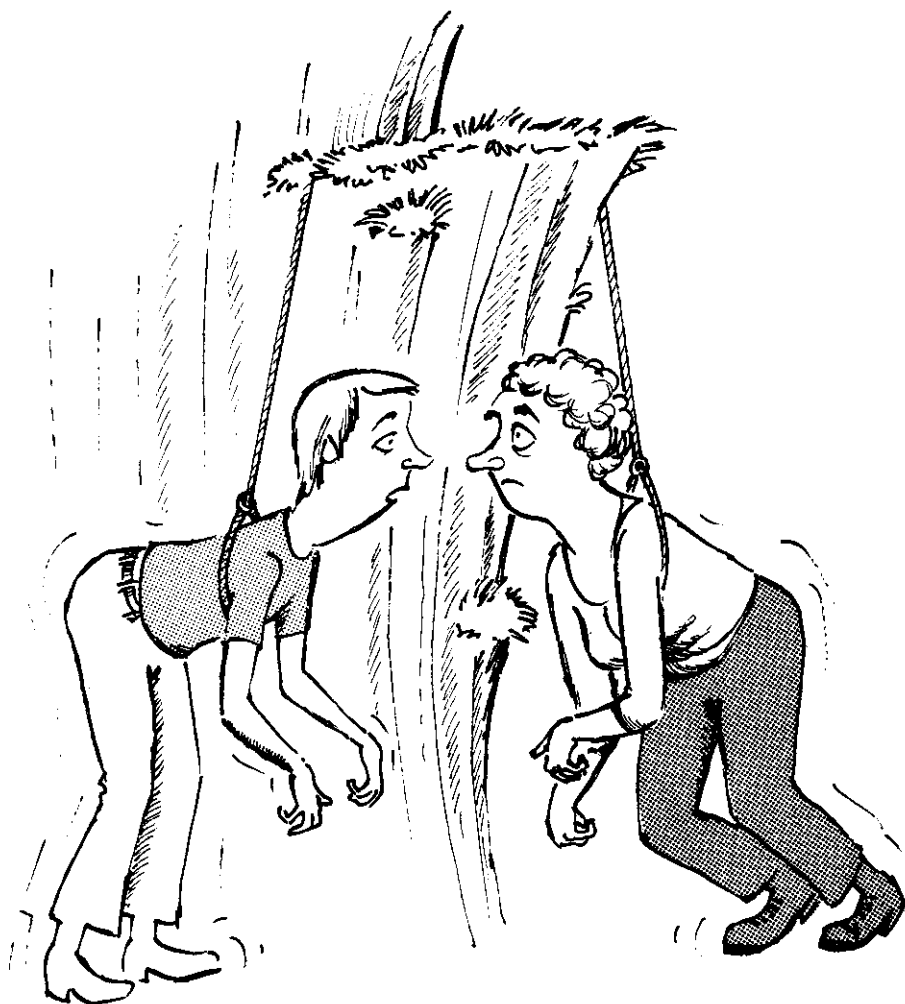
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SUPPORT IS NOT A ONE-WAY PROCESS



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# Introduction

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It's a fallacy, fanned into a flame by over-eager management, that the person who has the task of finding, selecting, placing and supporting volunteers is a superman or bionic woman. Often the responsibility for those tasks lies with a professional worker and may be a small proportion of his workload; sometimes there will be a person whose sole job is to work with volunteers. Seldom will there have been any training to prepare the worker for the complexity of the role: a complexity mirrored by the variety of people who volunteer and the range of jobs they do.

However, there are certain fundamental responsibilities that an organisation owes to its volunteers and that someone—let's assume for convenience someone called a voluntary service co-ordinator (VSC)—has to carry. One of these responsibilities is to ensure that volunteers receive the support they need.

This booklet is about how that support might be provided. The ideas it puts forward may be used in different ways and in different settings; the need for support is a common one expressed by volunteers representing the entire range of voluntary work.

The booklet does not pretend to cover all the ground or offer all the skills required: first because the task is impossible in such a short space, second because it would be foolish to assume that readers do not already have at least some experience and ability in this area, and third because it would be naive to expect that there are easy answers applicable in all circumstances. What we want to do is to help you to develop your expertise by asking you to consider some of the questions you could ask, some of the problems you might encounter and some of the methods you might use.

The written word is very limiting. What I should most like to do is engage in a dialogue with you, but since this is impossible I am attempting a second best and asking you to *participate* in this booklet rather than just read it. You can do this in two ways, both related to the presentation adopted.

First, you can examine some of the questions and issues raised in the light of your own experience and situation and provide the answers you feel most

appropriate. I hope that you will also question some of the assumptions embodied in these questions and perhaps explore some of your own.

Second, you can 'get involved' in the sketches or case studies that are used as illustrations of different kinds of volunteers. These are included so that you can relate general issues to particular examples. You might find it useful to consider situations from your own experience and apply them in the same way to the questions raised.

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# Why Support The Volunteer?

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Presumably you are reading this booklet because you feel that support of some kind is necessary for the volunteer; let's examine why this may be so. There are three main questions to consider.

Why do people volunteer at all? And are their reasons for volunteering compatible with the motivations of the client and the agency—and your own? If it is likely that motivations will differ or conflict, how can the volunteer be helped to meet his or her needs while responding to those of the client and others involved?

What does the prospective volunteer expect and how is this likely to differ from reality? If there is a difference, how best can the volunteer be armed to overcome the disappointment or confusion that may arise?

What is the attitude of paid staff to volunteers, and how can the volunteer be helped to understand it and deal with any confrontations or tensions?

## CASE STUDY 1

*Doreen is 48 and has lived locally almost all her married life. Her two daughters have married and moved away from home, and her son, aged 23, has just emigrated to Canada. This has left Doreen very much at a loss, since she has spent most of her time in the house with her life revolving round her family.*

*You found this out from Doreen at your initial meeting and it helped you in suggesting the most appropriate placement for her. But how can you be sure that Doreen is going to be able to cope with what, to her, is not only a strange environment and a new experience, but also a whole new way of life?*

## CASE STUDY 2

*Angela is 27 and married with two small children who now go to a playgroup every afternoon. Her husband is an executive who travels fairly extensively. He did not want Angela to take a job because he often needs to bring business guests home and expects Angela to prepare the meals. However, Angela felt she wanted another interest, and her husband suggested she*



*should undertake some voluntary work on one or two afternoons a week.*

*You have found something for her that seems to be satisfactory, but Angela is obviously worried that she may not always be able to keep to a voluntary commitment if her husband calls at short notice.*

*You are aware that Angela has a number of doubts, mainly about her own adequacy. What can you do about it?*

### **CASE STUDY 3**

**Youth Action '73** is a group of young people formed through the local youth club who have been undertaking voluntary work in the community for a few years and are well established. The group has been led by a part-time youth worker, and you have always found it helpful to your own work.

*Because of work and social pressures, the leader has recently left and you have been receiving a number of complaints (through staff and clients) that members of Youth Action '73 have acted irresponsibly by not fulfilling commitments.*

*Is there any way you can offer assistance?*

### **CASE STUDY 4**

**Arthur** is retired and has been one of your volunteers almost full time, for over two years. You have always regarded him as one of your most competent and reliable volunteers and have left him with a fairly high degree of responsibility. Recently, however, you have heard from some of your professional colleagues that Arthur has been taking on too much responsibility and acting in an independent, sometimes aggressive way, upsetting other volunteers as well as staff. This seems out of character to you, although it is some time since you really talked to Arthur.

*Is there any way the situation might have been avoided?*

If any of these four sketches rings true with you (they are all based on real experiences), or if you can identify similar situations in your own work, the question 'why support the volunteer' has a clear answer. A more pertinent question might therefore be 'what potential difficulties for volunteers can be overcome by effective support?'

All of us come up against the sorts of difficulties that are described in the case studies from time to time. And often these difficulties are questions of motivation, expectation or attitude.

Is there, for example a likelihood that Angela's *motivation* may impair her chances of being satisfactorily integrated in her voluntary work? We can't (and wouldn't want to) change Angela's motivation, but we may be able to talk through with her and the others involved the best kind of voluntary work she could undertake *for her*.

Perhaps Doreen's *expectations* prevent her feeling secure enough to come through the initial hurdles of the work you can offer. Insecurity, especially in new situations, is common to most of us; it can be overcome if others recognise it and help us get rid of our distorted perceptions of reality.

The *attitudes* of paid staff may prevent their recognising Youth Action '73's loss of leadership and need for guidance. Arthur, too, seems to have come up against a conflict that may in part be due to his attitude to paid staff and their attitude to him and, perhaps, to volunteers in general.

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# What Does Support Mean?

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A simple definition of 'support' is not very helpful. The important point is that whatever is offered has to be appropriate. You have to ask yourself, in each situation, 'What kind of support does this person need to be more effective in his voluntary efforts?' In one case, support may mean a regular (say fortnightly) session with you to discuss difficulties. This may be more of a counselling session than straightforward information giving. In another case, the volunteer may need to meet others in a similar situation to gain confidence and enthusiasm. In yet another, all that may be needed is an initial briefing, with contact every few months to maintain the relationship.

Support, then, means whatever is needed to assist the individual in developing his or her own task as a volunteer. That may mean offering opportunities for a volunteer's development as a person, or helping him or her through a crisis, or providing him or her with information, or any combination of these and other types of support.

You may have a leaning towards offering one kind of support rather than another, probably because you feel more comfortable with that approach. But if you accept that different volunteers need different support at different times, that's obviously not enough.

Here, then, are some key issues to consider.

First, are we concerned with supporting the volunteer in order a) to offer the volunteer the possibility of personal growth and development or b) to help the volunteer improve his skills and effectiveness in his voluntary work? Many people have put this distinction to me and I accept the importance of looking at it in deciding on an overall approach. To go farther, the way you see this distinction and the approach you adopt to it must reflect your whole philosophy of volunteering. Personally, I find it difficult to accept the distinction as valid. Surely it is impossible to separate a person's feelings about himself and others from the way he acts in relationships? And is it not mainly through his relationship with others that we decide whether or not the volunteer is operating effectively?

Second, support means different things to different people at different times.

In terms of the volunteer's expectations, it may have to do with defining the rules, the hierarchies, even the language of the agency: including such vital pieces of information as who is accountable to whom and where the limits are for individual volunteers. In terms of motivation it may have to do with helping the volunteer to understand why he finds it particularly easy or difficult to work within a given situation. That, in turn, may help him in his approach to and contact with others. Similarly, support in relationship to attitudes may help in defining roles and providing a basis for better communication.

Third, support is not a one-way process. Volunteers can support you as much as you can support them; they can also support one another and it is usually peer group support that has the most positive effect in the long term. The smile of the patient, or of the handicapped child or the housebound pensioner may be the most important single piece of support for a particular volunteer. The warm letter from a local councillor may give someone else the encouragement he needs to persevere in visiting the elderly in his street.

Fourth, as people develop in their voluntary work the kind of support they need is likely to change. The apparently straightforward advice given in the early stages on such things as rules, accountability and limit-setting may become an area for discussion and negotiation. It may no longer be supportive just to provide information; instead one may have to provide the volunteer with opportunities to examine these issues with other volunteers and staff. As people's experience grows, their attitudes may change, and their behaviour alter. Constant re-examination of the support being offered is necessary.

**Doreen** is trying to find a substitute for her family and to escape the loneliness of the house to which she has tied herself for so long. You can see that she is a warm, caring, responsive person, but you recognise her anxiety about entering a new world of strange people, rules and customs.

*She hardly knows what to ask, because she has no idea what to expect. What does Doreen need? How can you ensure that she is helped to come to terms with her anxieties and discover how to use her assets to the benefit of your agency's clients?*

**Angela** appears to you to be both efficient and sociable, but very unsure about her own ability to cope with decisions.

*You are aware that she may be very much dominated—even intimidated—by her husband, although you are very wary of discussing this with her. You will have to note Angela's desire for an outside interest, but also her anxiety*



*about being needed at home and the necessity for her to reconcile this with what your agency might require.*

*In what way can you offer Angela the support she needs to allow her to develop her self confidence while allowing her some flexibility in her voluntary work?*

**Youth Action '73** *has been a valuable asset to your agency, and the members have both given much to and received much from their involvement in the past.*

*You were content to leave all the liaison work to their own leader and so had little or no contact with the members. Perhaps the leader, too, needed some kind of support and it might well have been of long-term benefit to you to have had meetings with the group.*

*However, you didn't, and now that the leader has gone, and you have received some complaints, you obviously have to do something.*

*These are young people, without any obvious leader, but they have been working with clients through your agency and have some experience. Why are they becoming the cause for complaint? What can you offer them that will encourage more consistency? What can you do to increase the understanding between the staff and clients and the youth group? How can you help Youth Action '73 solve its leadership difficulty and maintain a satisfactory involvement without appearing to mount a takeover?*

*You had almost forgotten **Arthur**; he had become part of the furniture, until he began to upset other volunteers and some of the professional staff.*

*Somehow you must get to the bottom of this. You need to find out exactly what has been going on and how it arose. Is something troubling Arthur? Are there particular volunteers whom he upsets? Does he realise how the professional staff in your agency regard him as a volunteer? How can you continue to involve Arthur in voluntary work and ensure that his contribution is acceptable to him, the other volunteers and the staff?*

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# Who Needs Support ?

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The simple answer to the question above is everyone. Unfortunately, very few of us get adequate, appropriate support even when we need it most (which is, often, when it is too late!). The same is true of the volunteer and it is often an implied part of the voluntary service co-ordinator's job to make sure that whatever support is needed can be provided at the right time by the right person.

It is worth looking at the kind of support that particular volunteers in your care need, and how they would react to different offers of such support. It may seem obvious, for example, that someone coming into voluntary work for the first time needs support—perhaps information, perhaps assistance in making relationships, if he sees this area as a major obstacle.

At the other end of the scale, and perhaps less obviously, well-established volunteers need support too. With them it may be much more difficult to know how to go about giving it. Simply because someone is experienced in voluntary work doesn't mean that she won't have problems from time to time, or want reassurance. The experienced volunteer may find new trends or new personnel difficult to cope with. Changes in her own life style and circumstances may give her a different perception of the work. The work itself may become repetitive and dull, no longer a challenge to someone who wants to make a significant contribution. No matter how independent and competent the volunteer may seem to be, circumstances will from time to time make her feel that progress is impossible without outside help. If the volunteer feels unable to tackle these changes alone, she may cease to gain satisfaction from voluntary involvement.

It would be a mistake, though, to see support as necessary only for the volunteer who is having problems. To ensure that our volunteers become (or remain) effective in their work with others, we must see support as being constructive and educative as well as helpful and restorative. This being so, you could spend your whole week offering support to volunteers. Clearly that would be self-defeating; but perhaps it is worth pointing out here that I have made no comments about who should offer support. Who, other than yourself, might offer support to the case-study volunteers?

Doreen, Angela, Arthur and Youth Action '73 all need support. What you have to decide is just how much time you can afford to spend on offering direct, regular support, what kind of support is called for and whether you are the most appropriate or only person anyway.

*Can you best help **Doreen** by providing her with a lot of basic information yourself about how the organisation works, what her voluntary involvement will entail, what is expected of her, who the other people are and so on? Or is there perhaps someone else, more appropriate than you, who could help Doreen through her introduction to the world of your agency? If so, how do you make sure that whoever else does help Doreen is really able to provide the kind of support needed? And can you show Doreen that you are really available to her if she wants to talk to you?*

***Angela** may need more than the usual amount of regular support. Only time and your own observation will tell how much she needs and how it might best be offered. Angela may quickly come to grips with her voluntary work and find that her very involvement in the organisation gives her the self confidence she needs. But this may lead in turn to difficulties in her relationship with her husband and she may need to discuss these with someone. How do you maintain enough contact with Angela to be able to help if necessary? Do you, in any case, see this as something you would wish to handle, and if so, how?*

***Youth Action '73** certainly seems to need support, although you may see this in terms of finding someone else to work with the group. Support for Youth Action '73, however, may not be only through direct contact with them. Can you encourage an atmosphere of mutual trust and understanding between these young volunteers and the people they are working with? If so, what's the best way to do it?*

***Arthur** has apparently never needed your support: or is it that you have forgotten that he may have done? Is it just Arthur you need to offer support to in this situation?*

*How much consideration should you give to the way the other volunteers and the professional staff see Arthur? Can you create more openness so that people can be helped to support one another, and perhaps provide Arthur with a view of himself as a member of a team? If so, how would you go about it?*

To summarise these perhaps rather obvious points: everyone needs support; as people's needs and circumstances change, the kind of support they need changes accordingly; talking to a staff member or others involved with the volunteer may be the best way of supporting the volunteer.



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# Why Do People Volunteer ?

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The support given to volunteers must be based on the volunteer's own needs. To offer support of real benefit, you need to have a clear understanding of why the volunteer is there in the first place. Moreover, in certain circumstances, for example where a volunteer is likely to be engaged in work involving delicate or difficult relationships, the volunteer himself may have to work out what his motivations are. The question may arise here as to whether the essence of the voluntary contribution is the need of the client or the need of the volunteer. Your own experience may have put you theoretically on one or other side of this either/or argument. But in practice, unless the needs of both client and volunteer are met, the process will not be satisfactory to either. Indirectly, of course, in discussing the support of the volunteer, we have to remember that we have the client and the agency very much in mind—quite how we have them in mind may depend very much on how we regard them!

That people volunteer for countless different reasons hardly needs stating. What is less obvious is that the important reasons are often the ones that are unstated—even unrealised—by the volunteer. It is important for the professional worker to recognise the covert reasons behind the volunteer's motivation as well as to hear the overt explanations of them.

You have to remember to ask yourself 'What is this person trying to get out of volunteering?' Only the most insensitive worker is likely to put the question to the volunteer so bluntly, but it needs to be answered. An understanding of the volunteer's needs is a key factor in being able to support him or her.

To gain this understanding, the professional worker needs to establish an atmosphere of mutual trust and confidence with the volunteer. The worker has to remain open and receptive to what the volunteer is saying and doing. Why, for example, does that lady continually ask to work with people who are lonely? Is it perhaps that because she's alone she knows what loneliness feels like? Why does that young man not want to continue with the work he has been doing so well with befriending an elderly, housebound lady? Can he no longer cope with the responsibility? Does he have difficulty in mixing with people of his own age? Why does that young couple want to do more and



more voluntary work together? Is this a cover-up for a marriage problem? Is it a compensation for something missing in their lives?

None of these suggestions may be the right one, but the worker must be aware of the possibilities and realise that support may eventually be needed in these areas.

**Doreen's** motivation may be fairly clear and she herself may be well aware that her main reason for coming to you is to fill the emptiness in her life. You might ask yourself whether her need to look after others will overcome her fear of new situations. Will you also be able to know whether Doreen's 'mothering' impulse is having a good or bad effect on any client she is in contact with? Can you help Doreen to understand the real needs of the client and the effect any over-protectiveness may have on them?



DOREEN'S MOTHERING IMPULSE

What are **Angela's** main motivations for coming to volunteer? A need to have other interests and activity? An escape from her home and the domination of her husband? Fear of upsetting her husband, who suggested that she volunteer? A desire for social contact with other people? Perhaps there are others. The question is how important you think it is for you to know or for Angela to understand her motivations and what difference it makes. At this

stage perhaps only you can assess how best you can help Angela to achieve satisfaction through a helpful voluntary involvement. These are delicate and difficult questions and thus easily avoided; probably at a cost in the long run both to Angela and her voluntary contribution.

The main motivation of any group, and perhaps of a youth group in particular, is a social one. The members of **Youth Action '73** are no doubt using the group to test themselves through their relationships with each other, but also in their dealings with the outside world. Can you use the feelings of the group to help them solve their present difficulties by, for example, asking them what problems they thought would face a leader adopted from the group? It could be that, thrown upon their own resources, the members are finding it difficult to negotiate new roles—especially leadership—together. Would understanding the group's motivation help you to offer support to the members?

You were sure that when **Arthur** first came he was looking for something to occupy his time after retirement and had a genuine desire to use this time to help others. Probably you were right, but Arthur's present behaviour may indicate that things have changed and that he has other needs. Does Arthur need to maintain or gain an authoritative position? (What was his status at work?) Is this threatened by the way in which professional staff treat him? Does he feel that, at his age, he deserves greater respect than he feels he gets? Does he, after all, not want the responsibility he has been given, needing instead a more easy, informal contact with others?

The motivations of others in this situation are important too. What is it in the other volunteers that has made Arthur upset them? What makes professional staff find it difficult to cope with what they see as Arthur's abrasiveness and authoritarian attitude? And what about you? Why have you left Arthur—a key volunteer—to get on with it? Did you find it uncomfortable to offer support to someone who presented himself as capable and of high status? Or was it that, as so often happens, you forgot that where relationships are involved, things are always changing?

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# How Do You Offer Support ?

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Let's not forget what support is actually about—to help the volunteer to become more effective and therefore enhance his contribution. For this to happen, the volunteer must be helped to understand what this contribution is and how it affects other people's lives. If an adult is to develop this kind of understanding, he must be helped to come to it himself. Your contribution is to ask the questions that will cause the volunteer to probe into what he is doing, why he is doing it, what effect it's having, whether it's the effect he intended, and if so, why; what he could have done instead, what the outcome might have been and so on. All the time you are asking the volunteer to search, you are facing him with the challenging possibility that he can find out himself how to be more effective. Once you start to tell him what to do, you may be taking away the possibility of allowing real growth.

The volunteer needs to know he is worthwhile, and regular praise or acknowledgement is important. But this kind of reinforcement becomes superficial and sometimes even counterproductive if there is uncertainty in the volunteer's mind as to whether he is really making a useful contribution. Sometimes the doubt already exists; sometimes you may even have to cause it in order to help the volunteer to become more aware of his potential.

You can give support by helping the volunteer to measure his contribution in terms that he recognises as worthwhile. Pushing a trolley around a hospital ward may not appear of much importance to a volunteer until she is helped to see the pleasure and comfort that patients get from her contact with them. The young people digging an old man's front garden may regard the task as simply hard slog unless they appreciate how proud the old man once was of his garden, and the pain he felt when he could no longer look after it.

Just telling volunteers these things is almost always less effective than allowing them to work them out for themselves. So providing them with the opportunities to chat about what they're doing, with or without you, as individuals or in a group, with paid staff or with those being helped, may be useful.

*Giving support to **Doreen** in the first stages probably means, as we have already seen, helping to lessen her anxiety by giving her a good picture of*



*what to expect. How you do this depends on both you and Doreen. What information will you give her, and how? Who will you introduce Doreen to, and how can you help her feel at ease? What can you show her of your organisation and how it works?*

*Later on, would Doreen find it more helpful to talk to you privately or in a group, or with someone else? If Doreen wants to develop her work within the agency, how can you ensure that she is helped to make creative contacts with others?*

*To begin with, support for **Angela** may have to concentrate on giving her confidence. How can you help to clarify what she is doing and to see what her role is in your organisation? How can you build up her feeling of adequacy in her voluntary work? Eventually, you may find that Angela receives greatest support from others, either informally, or within an organised group.*

*Since you are aware that Angela may be having personal problems with her husband, you will have to keep your eyes open for any counselling need that Angela may express. It is then up to you and Angela to decide whether you deal with this, or refer her to someone else with the necessary competence.*

*With **Youth Action '73** you may be almost forced into meeting them and be seen as a representative of authority. You need, therefore, to examine your own role within the group and decide whether you are able to offer direct support. Can you get enough of the group's confidence to work with them? Are you able to identify the members of the group who seem to carry most weight and with whom you might hold more regular meetings? Can you convey to the group the value of their contribution to your agency and help members see the wider aspects of their involvement? Can someone else be found who can carry out this role?*

*With **Arthur** too you may be put into some sort of confrontation. Is he aware of the problem he is causing? Can you help him to look at what is happening and see why people are upset at his approach and actions? Can you have a meeting with Arthur and the other volunteers which, while not posing a threat to Arthur, can provide a basis for talking about roles? Can you use the situation to help volunteers and staff towards a deeper understanding of the partnership aspect of the relationship?*

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# What Kind of Support ?

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This section describes a number of ways in which you might provide support for volunteers. They are not mutually exclusive, in fact you probably already use a combination of some of these methods; neither are they exhaustive: you may have a few, more way-out, ideas. Within each method I have tried to indicate advantages and disadvantages and the main points to consider.

The most appropriate way of offering support depends upon circumstances, people's (including your) preferences, and existing patterns of relationships and other sources of support—for example, groups that have been established for some time.

## *The first session with a new volunteer*

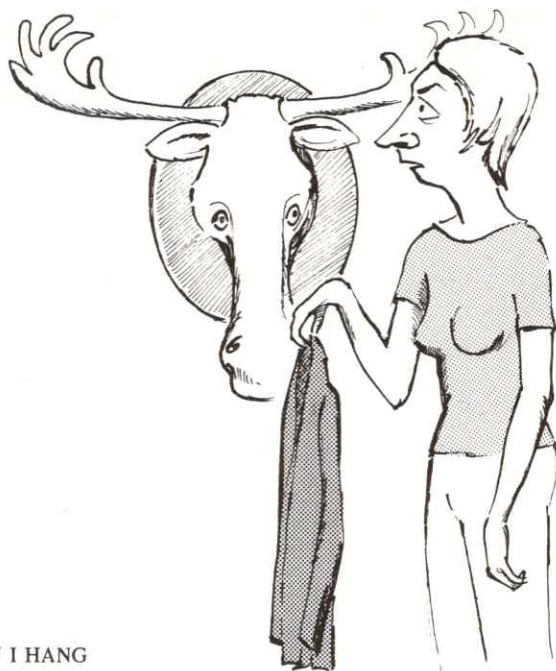
Interviewing and training are dealt with in other booklets in this series. In setting up a support structure, the VSC must, however, look at the new volunteer and at how to introduce the concept of the voluntary contribution in what is usually a new environment. This can be part of the interviewing process. More helpfully, perhaps, it can be a follow-up to the interview, after the volunteer has had a first taste of voluntary work.

This is the time to help the volunteer to look at her expectations in the light of initial experience. The pattern of support should begin once the volunteer has something to relate to and someone who will listen to her new experience.

The initial session is also the time to examine with the volunteer why everyone needs some kind of support, as a normal and integral part of being involved. The problem is that it is useless to try to convince the new volunteer that she needs support until she sees that she does.

It is likely to be more helpful at this stage to get the volunteer to discuss the kinds of problems she may encounter and the ways that she may be helped to deal with them. A 'problem' for a new volunteer is as likely to be 'where can I hang my coat up' as 'I'm scared to knock on someone's front door and offer to do the shopping'. The volunteer needs to know that such 'problems' are normal and not a sign of inadequacy.

The main task at the initial session is to get the volunteer to recognise that



WHERE CAN I HANG  
MY COAT UP?

there is someone who is receptive, understanding, patient and accessible. Whether this person is you or not depends on your own perception of your task, your role within the agency, and whether the volunteer can relate better to you or to another person. More often than not, another professional or another volunteer will be the most appropriate person and an early introduction will have to be made.

### *The initial group session*

You may have groups of volunteers coming forward to help, or you may recruit a number of individuals at the same time. In either case it may be both time saving and more beneficial to the volunteers to arrange for an induction session with the group. The approach you use will need to take into account which kind of group you are meeting.

With a ready-formed group, you will be dealing with people who know one another, and who presumably have some experience as a group. Roles, particularly that of leadership, will already have been defined in some way. The VSC will probably be expected by the group to talk to them about the kind of voluntary work available and tell them about the agency and its



people and organisation. But you are entering a two-way contract and need to know something about the group as well.

A group that has been going for some time will have a dynamic of its own. The VSC should be able to judge, by listening and looking, its strengths and weaknesses, who the leadership figures are and whether they are accepted by all, whether some people are isolates or left out, whether agreement is real or in some cases forced.

In offering the group some support, you need to be able to see who in the group can be the most supportive and who is likely to need the most help. A group like this can provide its own support structure, but may need you to act as catalyst, perhaps through discussions with the one or two group members most likely to be able to take on the support role.

With the second kind of group, you are dealing with a collection of individuals newly brought together by you to discuss their early attempts at voluntary work. The only role that will have been established is that of the co-ordinator, and it may be difficult to engender the kind of atmosphere that will enable people in the group to open up to one another. You have to show yourself to be a receptive listener; you also have to avoid putting pressure on people who may not want to talk in a group and to prevent talkative members from dominating the discussion. Strange things can happen in a group of this nature and the co-ordinator must be aware of them. One person may begin to use the group as a therapy exercise and recount personal details. Others may feel inhibited about talking in this way and worry that pressure may be put on them to do so.

The group leader can provide support by offering a clear structure for the discussion, for example, allowing people to recount their experiences so that you can learn from them and present to the group a general understanding of voluntary work. Whether you arrange for further sessions with individuals or with the group may depend on what you see as most helpful. More probably, the people in the room will decide that themselves if the option is open to them.

Much has been written on working with groups and if you intend to use this method of support it would certainly be worthwhile to read some of the material (see references).

### *Informal support*

Most of the support that volunteers receive will be informal and indirect. The casual chat over a cup of coffee, the recognition and acceptance of volunteers by paid staff members, the regular news bulletin: all these provide important

communication links and a feeling of integration into the wider groupings of volunteers and organisations. Social events may also create helpful meeting points, especially where volunteers mix with paid staff and (where possible) clients.

The co-ordinator has an important role to play even where the provision of support is informal and low key. People cannot meet over coffee if there is no provision for them to do so. Paid staff will only acknowledge the existence and value of the voluntary effort if their own feelings have been taken into account and they have a positive attitude.

News bulletins and notice boards are only of value if volunteers are both makers and recipients of news. There is no room here to expand on the practical possibilities, but that should not be taken to underrate the importance of the creative use of information systems. Too often volunteers are expected to find things out by reading through a mass of scrappy notices on some ill-placed notice board. News sheets are more often than not the result of a paid worker typing out some hastily written paragraphs on a stencil telling volunteers about recent work and forthcoming events.

Your support role here could be to encourage volunteers, staff and clients to embark on a joint project to disseminate news and air points of view. This could easily become a way for the three parties in the voluntary situation to test their reactions and understand the others' feelings. Those who fear that this could open up conflict are only trying to keep submerged the underlying attitudes that need airing before understanding can be reached.

Continuing and informal support that you are able to provide is not, therefore, just a means of keeping everyone happy and things running smoothly. You might feel that the best support you can give a volunteer is to have him confront a paid worker with some of the anomalies he has found, or to encourage volunteers to present a report about feeling underused. Clearly you cannot support the volunteer without providing a framework for informal two-way contact with paid workers.

### *The regular support session*

How frequently and regularly you hold support sessions with individuals will depend on many things. The main constraint is no doubt your own time. Offering regular individual support can be extremely time consuming. Why, then, offer it at all? There may be a number of reasons.

The volunteer may be having a particular difficulty about the voluntary work he is doing, doubts about its value and so on; these may be insoluble unless you can spend some time talking it over. The real root of the problems and



ways of overcoming them will seldom, if ever, come up in the first one or two sessions. Lack of confidence is often responsible for preventing people undertaking some new task or extending the voluntary work they do. This may warrant several sessions over a period with the volunteer concerned.

As co-ordinator, you could find the exercise of offering regular individual support of great value. It is too easy to forget the pressures facing the volunteer unless you are constantly confronted with them. Helping one volunteer to solve his difficulties will provide you with expertise in dealing with others. And the same could be true of your professional or voluntary colleagues if they took on this support role.

### *The regular group session*

You and your volunteers might find the regular group session the most valuable in terms of support. Again, you may find dangers here in that members want to use the group as a form of therapy, or that the group becomes a very comfortable social one. There is nothing wrong with either of these developments except that you may not want to be involved unless members of the group are prepared to look at their voluntary work as well.



THE GROUP BECOMES VERY COMFORTABLE

One of the main advantages of working with a group is that members can offer one another support, as long as the structure and purpose are clear. It is for the person taking the group—probably you in the first sessions—to demonstrate the structure and clarify the aims.

The structure should be one that enables the group to look at a particular problem presented by a volunteer, in a logical manner, clarifying the issues and discussing the problems involved and the methods of dealing with them. Your technique will be one that can develop according to your and the group's own preference. The important point to remember is that your role is to enable the volunteers to see problems more clearly and to offer them opportunities to discuss ways of resolving them. Your main function is to question, not to answer, unless there is a clearcut answer to do with, say, an organisational matter.

### *The self-help group*

The major constraint that prevents the VSC from offering regular and direct support to his volunteers is that of time. And time is often the main, though not the best, reason for encouraging self help in volunteers who want support. A better reason would be that encouraging self help in all spheres of community work should be a major part of our work.

Your support of volunteers should both convince them how necessary such support is and make them increasingly less dependent on you to give it. The volunteers must come to see the relevance of support and recognise that they can develop and apply your methods just as well themselves. Once you can encourage a few volunteers to discuss their experiences together in a constructive way, you can ease out until they can meet without you. Any number of people, from two to twenty, can meet in this way to discuss their work, although the optimum number is nine or ten.

Volunteers will be able to develop their own self-help support systems more easily if the co-ordinator encourages a gradual independence, but is available when help is needed. One of the main things you can do to help the volunteers at this stage is offer information about resources available to them. You can, for example, put small groups in touch with one another so that they can compare notes and gain a wider perspective from talking to volunteers in other fields.

### *Counselling*

It is in the very nature of voluntary participation that some of the people drawn to it need help themselves. The volunteer can become as much of a client to you as the client is to the volunteer.

Support is intended to help the worker look at his or her own performance in a given task. After a while a support session with a professional supervisor may develop into something very much akin to counselling. The main difference is that support relates to the task being undertaken and is a facility that everyone needs at some time. Counselling, on the other hand, aims at helping people with some personal difficulty and is intended as an aid to personal growth; it need not be linked to a particular task. Counselling is related to the individual; it is highly skilled and requires not only a high degree of sensitivity and perception but also a knowledge and experience of counselling techniques.

There is room here to offer only a few pointers as to how the co-ordinator can recognise his own limitations and develop the appropriate skills.

One has to take note of the volunteer who expresses, overtly, or, more commonly, covertly, a personal difficulty that is blocking his ability to deal with some of the problems that may arise in a support session. If there does seem to be some such difficulty a counselling session might be the appropriate means to deal with it—but only if the person who seems to need counselling is aware that there is some such personal problem and asks for help in some way.

The counsellor has to be prepared to offer a regular counselling session to the volunteer (who in this case can be called the client) and to assess with him or her the number and frequency of sessions needed.

The counsellor may have to be prepared to accept that 'constructive listening' rather than advice giving will be of far greater value to the client in the long run.

Unless you have had particular training the best move is to suggest someone who you know can offer counselling; it is important for you to find out who is suitable and accessible for the job.

### *'Counselling out'*

You have a responsibility to your agency, your staff colleagues, the clients, the volunteers and finally yourself. One of the ways you may need to exercise that responsibility is by helping a volunteer whose involvement is potentially damaging to see that this is so.

Rejection is one of the most difficult things for anyone to experience and you will have to exercise great sensitivity here. 'Counselling out' does not mean passing a problem volunteer on to some other agency or department, for that is simply opting out of responsibility. We have to ask ourselves, as in any

other instance, 'what does this volunteer need and how can I help?' Where there is some conflict and you cannot provide a place for the volunteer within your agency, you have to help him or her to see why. If you are able to find alternative ways of involving the volunteer you are obviously in a happier position. In the end, however, you must face the inevitable decision about the priority you place on your clients, your agency, the volunteers and your own limited time.

I can think of no easy way to suggest how you go about this particular task. What's significant, however, is that I do include rejecting a volunteer or 'counselling out' in a booklet on support. Seen in that light the process can become a more positive one for both you and the volunteer.



#### GETTING VOLUNTEERS OFF THEIR OWN BACKS

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# Who Supports Whom ?

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Our producing and your reading this booklet may suggest that all paid coordinators have both the inclination and the ability to support the volunteer. In reality this is seldom the case. Moreover, the widely held assumption that the VSC is the person most appropriate to offer support to the volunteer, in terms of benefit both to the volunteer and to the agency, may often be mistaken; it may be worthwhile to question those assumptions and look at alternatives.

In setting priorities, the VSC has to decide how much time to allocate to offering support. He or she also has to make a more far-reaching decision about how much time to spend in helping paid staff to view the engagement of volunteers in a positive way.

It would be possible to see both of these points leading to the encouragement of professional workers to become involved in the support of volunteers. This might be for the professional to be involved on a one-to-one basis, or acting as a support worker with a group of volunteers. The VSC's involvement would be to initiate and encourage the process. The involvement of other professionals would give them a much more positive role with volunteers and lead to a greater degree of understanding and joint consultation. The idea would, of course, have to be presented gradually, and tactfully, to avoid the professional's feeling that the VSC was offloading responsibility. Negotiation would need to be particularly delicate in cases where professionals have welcomed the appointment of a VSC as a way of getting volunteers off their own backs.

It could be helpful to remember that one barrier to your enabling other people—whether professionals or other volunteers—might be your own attitudes. Do you get great satisfaction from supporting others and helping them overcome their difficulties? Do you feel that other people can be expected to understand 'your' volunteers, or that a group of volunteers is capable of providing support to its members? The way you answer these and similar questions could indicate your own attitudes towards enabling support from someone other than yourself. The satisfactions of offering a 'shoulder to cry on', of being identified as a 'mother figure' may be compelling, but not

always most appropriate to all concerned or most helpful in the longer term.

A final word about you. It's all very well talking about supporting the volunteer, but no one can be very effective at anything for long unless they get support themselves. Whatever you begrudge giving time for, don't begrudge giving it for your own support. How to get support could take up another booklet: it is as well to note, however, that much of what has been said about supporting volunteers could be applied to all of us.

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## Some questions for VSCs to ask themselves : a checklist

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- 1 Do I provide adequate induction/introduction to the organisation and its procedures and etiquette (including written information)? How can I check what is adequate?
- 2 Do I see that preparation for the job is provided by someone who understands fully what is required and has a positive attitude towards involving volunteers?
- 3 Do I provide continuing training—for example, providing book lists for volunteers who are interested in increasing their knowledge, or getting speakers from various professions to explain their roles or the work of their departments?
- 4 Do volunteers know when, where and how to see me? Do I initiate meetings with volunteers (individuals or groups) or do I always wait for them to come to me? Am I available informally, say over coffee or tea, as well as more formally in my office?
- 5 Do I give volunteers the encouragement of knowing that needing help or advice is normal? And do I give them any guidance on when to turn to professional staff who may be able to answer some queries better than I?
- 6 Do I encourage feedback from volunteers, either through regular group sessions or from individuals when the need is felt on either side? Do I try to involve paid staff in this dialogue?
- 7 Do I *listen* to the volunteers? Do I encourage suggestions and constructive criticisms? How do I use these comments? Do I explain adequately why some suggestions may not be feasible? Do I encourage the same behaviour from professionals?
- 8 Do I say thank you as well as expecting other staff to do so?
- 9 Do I try to find out why volunteers are leaving?

- 10 Do I have an 'early warning' system—for example, a method of regular checking on attendance (or, more important, unexplained non-attendance)? Do I appreciate that stated reasons for non-attendance may not always be the real reason?
- 11 Do I have a regular system of consultation with user staff?
- 12 Do I provide some means by which volunteers can move into different roles when circumstances or needs change?
- 13 Do I make the best possible use of the special skills of volunteers and accept that these are not always apparent at the outset?
- 14 Do I provide all the recognised forms of general support—meetings, occasional parties, notice boards, newsletters, and so on? Do I make certain that volunteers know about organisational plans and policy wherever possible so that they feel that they are an essential part of the caring team?
- 15 Do I give the necessary support to individual volunteers in special need, and how can I know when they are in need?



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## **Volunteer Centre Publications**

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### **VOLUNTEER CENTRE CASE STUDIES**

- 1 'Volunteers' and 'clients' in a neighbourhood care project
- 2 Involving the housebound in the provision of neighbourhood care
- 3 Voluntary drivers in a continuum of care scheme for the elderly
- 4 Community care in a rural general practice
- 5 The involvement of volunteers in family casework
- 6 A co-ordinated approach to juvenile delinquency
- 7 The role of radio in stimulating neighbourhood care
- 8 Volunteer involvement in an education and treatment programme for problem drinkers
- 9 'Coffee-shop caring'
- 10 Shared work in an office (the Shelton probation office, Staffordshire probation service)
- 11 Discontinuity and community involvement: the role of temporary staff in stimulating volunteer involvement
- 12 Volunteers in a primary school
- 13 A day centre that enables the elderly infirm to leave a hospital setting with security

## **Working with Volunteers**

- 1 Support
- 2 Training
- 3 Selection and recruitment (available spring 1978)
- 4 Frameworks (available spring 1978)

**The Volunteer, Community and Society:** report of a Volunteer Centre conference attended by representatives of the health, social, probation and after-care services, and voluntary organisations.

**Encouraging the Community:** the contribution made by the social services departments.

**Pivot:** report of a working party on the National Association of Voluntary Help Organisers (NAVHO), produced on behalf of NAVHO.

**Voluntary Service Co-ordinators in the Health Services, 1975:** a statistical analysis and directory of posts.

## **Young People as Volunteers**

### **The Role of Television in Stimulating Voluntary Action**

**Creative Partnerships:** a study of voluntary community involvement in Leicestershire.

**Volunteer Involvement in the National Health Service:** evidence to the Royal Commission.

A response to the DHSS consultative document *Priorities for Health and Social Services in England*.

**Current Research:** a directory of research into voluntary activity since 1970.

**Bargain or Barricade?:** the role of the social services in meeting social need through involving the community.

**Government Policy on Community Involvement and the Health and Personal Social Services:** address by The Rt Hon David Ennals MP, Secretary of State for the Social Services, at The Volunteer Centre AGM, 1977.

*For a full list of titles and prices, please send a stamped addressed A4 envelope to the administrative officer at The Volunteer Centre, 29 Lower Kings Road, Berkhamsted, Herts HP4 2AB.*

# **The Volunteer Centre**

## **INVOLVING THE COMMUNITY IN MEETING SOCIAL NEED**

The Volunteer Centre was opened in September 1973; registered as a charity, it is financed by government and voluntary trusts. The Centre was established in response to the Aves report on the role of the voluntary worker in the social services. The report had called for the setting up of a body to promote volunteering and to encourage opportunities for individual volunteers, voluntary agencies and community groups; the demand was supported by representatives of the statutory and voluntary sectors.

The Centre concentrates on three areas of activity: collecting and disseminating information on voluntary and community involvement; advising on the training of volunteers and of the people who work with them, and discussing, with statutory and voluntary authorities, possibilities for extending voluntary participation.

Now and over the next three years the broad focus of the Centre's work will be neighbourhood care. The study of current and potential caring resources will be an important theme: the Centre will also be examining ways of interweaving the activities of statutory and voluntary groups and of supporting 'informal carers'—families, neighbours, and friends.

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