

Late 1970's ?

## THE SERVICE AGENCY LOOKS AT STUDENT VOLUNTEERS

Harriet H. Naylor

Director of Volunteer Development

Office of Human Development

U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare

Swamped in October, bone dry by Christmas, the agency manpower planner regards student volunteers as a mixed blessing. Hard pressed for funds, each agency has to justify taking on any kind of new staff in cost/benefit terms. Twenty hours of service of which are five are spent in training (which also ties up expensive staff time) produce an equation dangerously close to no margin of benefit. Some agencies aren't very enthusiastic about any volunteers, and students seem to them to be more likely to rock the boat than others, asking questions which have no easy answers. Fortunately, a few agencies see the benefits which are there.

In the face of such negative attitudes, it is remarkable that student volunteering has burgeoned into one of the largest categories of persons serving in many agencies, and that colleges and schools seeking placements for field experience are able to find them. Agencies feel student programs are a luxury to them. Unfortunately, in some communities, students simply shop around with little campus guidance until they find a place to put in their hours. If they are lucky, they find a volunteer director who can counsel them into a spot where they can have a valid learning experience, do something worthwhile and explore vocational choices through firsthand observation and contact. In

others, they are perceived as free labor and put to work doing tasks the staff dislikes to do. So they leave.

Agency orientation and training are essential to volunteer effectiveness. No matter how sophisticated and knowledgeable any new staff member is, orientation is essential for fitting into a new role in a new setting and working there with volunteers is part of the adjustment. Training becomes a process for testing personal goals for congruence with those of the other persons with whom one works: the "consumer" of volunteer services, and the other paid providers of agency services, as well as the volunteers. Most agencies have found the best way to develop teamwork is to begin in orientation and training.

Promotion from direct service to policy and program development roles for staff and volunteers is an opportunity particularly significant for students. Their idealism and fresh viewpoint is a priceless contribution to the planning process. Under the new federalism, many laws are thrusting decision-making about priorities for limited community resources, revenue sharing and United Fund disbursement back to the community level. Slowly it is dawning on communities that the old "easy money" days of federal categorical programs are over, and that the money distributed under General and Special Revenue Sharing is theirs to use in response to many competing demands in every community. Expectations whetted by experimental and demonstration short term projects are building constituencies which feel the worth of the initial experiment proves their need and ought to justify high priority.

However, there are real limits to local and federal resources, especially during the current "stagflation". Bricks and mortar are wearing out, and demands for services ever increasing. Nowhere better than at public hearings can students see the real taxpayer rebellion and the intensified competition for support of human services. As the power structure decision-makers of tomorrow, students need maximum exposure to all facets of human needs, all forms of services and all means of problem solving. The current college generation will be supporting services for an ever-increasing proportion of elderly persons who have organized effectively and vote according to responsiveness to their needs. (Appropriations for programs for the older Americans often exceed the estimates submitted by the bureaus responsible for implementing them!) School bond issues and budgets are meeting increasing resistance, with falling enrollments. A few years ago, it was said to be the other way around; schools and children took top priority, but this seems no longer to be true. Student activism has calmed down as advocacy for other people and seems to be emerging in protest to their own tuition costs, which have certainly skyrocketed. They need to see the larger picture, too.

The agencies would like to see a return of some of the altruism which characterized student activists in the 60's and early 70's. Directors of volunteer services are recruiting on a different rationale: no longer "what you can do to change the system", but "how you can acquire qualifying experience as a volunteer for your future career". Many students who have a good experience as volunteers are ultimately hired by the same agency upon graduation. Even if this doesn't work out, the

agency finds the ex-volunteer can be interpreter of its program, sympathetic to the needs of its target group.

We have learned in a few years of growing emphasis on field experience education that having students join a staff brings word of new technology or theory which the service professionals might be too busy to learn about, otherwise. The opportunity for direct application and testing is stimulating much needed research in the voluntary sector, and the opportunity for classroom analysis may well improve agency practice. Field experience quality depends on two key counsellors: the quality of the campus counselling which guides student interests to an appropriate agency and the quality of agency counselling and training which reduces the pre-service period and deepens the commitment of the student to the service. Optimum cross fertilization is possible when faculty assist in training agency staff and volunteers, not abdicating the educative function entirely to the agency. Volunteers and agency staff feel truly recognized when asked to teach at a college. We need more of this exchange of wisdom learned from study and wisdom learned from direct observation and personal experience.

We have also learned that group placements double commitment to serve, by adding peer pressure. Even if the student volunteer works one-to-one with a client or on his own, his identity as a group member for feedback or social purposes will insure his performance for the honor of the group as well as for the sake of the service. Competitiveness is a value as long as it improves performance and reliability and doesn't put stress on the clients involved.

One factor students are quick to criticize is the way people have to diagnose their own problems, and figure out for themselves where to go for help in many communities. Students have observed that some agencies are preoccupied with selection of clients to serve, rather than inclusive. They like telephone crisis or information service because it involves a meaningful response to urgent needs. The ombudsman is a popular role for students, who need to understand that class advocacy, for all the victims of a problem, is much more effective than going to bat for one person which may mean real injustices to others quite as needful. Often, the linking volunteer, as from a mental institution into public school, gives the only continuous relationship the youth has, and sustains him over a difficult transition period.

Alvin Toffler, of Future Shock fame, in Ecospasm speaks of futurism as "anticipatory participation". It is to be hoped that student volunteers can use field experience learning to improve future human services. The optimism characteristic of youth is greatly needed by social agencies discouraged by fiscal and program demand pressures. Not knowing what has failed in the past, students often go ahead with an idea and prove that it can be done, after all. Often they wind up very respectful of the skills of the staff, and enter the same profession.

Margaret Mead told a commencement audience in June that professionals had killed volunteering. I hope by now that she has discovered the tremendous surge in volunteering represented particularly by students and by the elderly. They serve in their own programs, and together in

programs like the Grey Panthers and Foster Grandchild programs in public housing for the aged. Both are beautifully proving that the amateur, who does it for caring more than for gain, is humanizing agency services in almost twice the numbers of ten years ago, according to the 1974 ACTION Census Bureau study. And they take pride in not being paid to work -- neither the elderly nor the youth bow to crass commercialism, but volunteer for the sake of people and what they need. The least we can do is pay their out-of-pocket expenses. May they reform the old ways of helping which failed, and find better ones, combining the energy and enthusiasm of the young with the wisdom of the elderly. And may the agencies appreciate them as they are, stifling neither youths' compassion nor their spontaneity, nor the common sense and wisdom of their friends, the elderly!