Older Volunteers and New Frontiers

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Older volunteers can add a unique dimension to the life of an organization run by paid, generally younger personnel. Older volunteers can help to build bridges of understanding between generations within the organization, between paid workers and volunteers, between the organization and other organizations, and between the older volunteers themselves and other older persons in the community.

The great majority of the 25 million older Americans (Weg, 1981) can expect to be retired and in relatively good health for a number of years. Yet for many persons, lack of an occupation means a loss of their principal source of income as well as the basis for personal identity in a socially-valued work role. Volunteer work, though unpaid, offers a means of maintaining identity and participating in the life of the community.

Established organizations operated by paid personnel can successfully utilize this resource if they are willing to modify their operations to accommodate the new older volunteers. In organizations that use service volunteers, paid staff customarily recruit, deploy, and supervise them just as they do paid personnel. Often volunteers perform limited or unchallenging tasks because paid staff wish to retain administrative, professional, or supervisory roles for themselves.

Volunteers can engage in a full range of roles and create innovative ways to complement work of paid personnel as they develop new roles for older persons in the workplace. We will discuss guidelines for such involvement derived from the successful experience of a group of about 100 senior volunteers in the Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center at the University of Southern California. Here retired men and women, evolving as the Andrus Volunteers, have helped to accomplish the missions of the Center and University as they engage in a growing

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variety and number of self-enhancing, satisfying personal experiences.

Although these guidelines are based on a single case study, they have broad application. The success of this experiment has demonstrated the challenges and excitement that are possible through helping today's older adults to pioneer social inventions and improve the quality of life for everyone including themselves.

To describe the project, a profile of the Andrus Volunteers and their programs will be presented. Guidelines for practice which have emerged from this prototype will follow, and a brief summary will recapitulate the possibilities for similar efforts in expanding new frontiers.

ANDRUS VOLUNTEERS--A CASE STUDY

The Andrus Volunteer program began in 1973 as a research and demonstration project. Its goals--to augment the services of the Andrus Gerontology Center and to develop new roles for retired persons--can be seen today in the continuing integration of the program within the Center and in the expansion of its activities and projects. The effectiveness of Andrus Volunteers lies in the basic concept that it is a program "by" and "for" older adults.

Profile

In the fall of 1981, there were 103 volunteers: 63 active and 40 sustaining members. The active members included 21 men and 40 women. Ages ranged from 48 to 85, with 70 being the median age. The majority of Andrus Volunteers had been in professional/managerial positions prior to retirement, though some had not. Some members in retirement have sharply reduced incomes, yet they have been able to maintain a lifestyle compatible with that of their more affluent peers. While the university setting attracted many volunteers who had attended college, a significant minority had had no prior exposure to a college setting.

Funding

The Andrus Volunteers, like other components of the Gerontology Center, are expected to find their own fiscal support. The salary of the paid coordinator is the major expense. In addition, ongoing funds pay for part-time support staff; reimbursement for volunteer out-of-pocket expenses, principally some mileage; office supplies; and telephone. Initially funded for two years by a substantial grant from The Andrus Foundation, National Retired Teachers Association/American Association of Retired Persons (NRTA/AARP), subsequent sources of funding have included: small grants from the Administration on Aging, Title IA of the Higher Education Act, and from local foundations; Goldenera Associates, a Center support group; profits from volunteer publications; a seminar series; occasional reimbursement for speakers; newsletter subscriptions; a small membership fee; and gifts. The Andrus Volunteers raised approximately $5,000 last year through activities such as the Summer Institute Food Services Program, bazaars, and plant sales.

Center Request For Volunteers

Activities and projects of Andrus Volunteers follow the Gerontology Center's major thrusts: education, research, and community services. Volunteers have served the major divisions and the Center as a whole. They have responded to faculty, staff, and student requests for participants in multi-generational courses and classes, acting as teaching assistants, librarians, panelists, and instructors. They have served as research subjects and have collected data for the Research Institute. They have participated in model development and applied research in the Institute of Policy and Program Development as peer counselors, as members of advisory committees, and as technical assistants.

Guiding visitors on tours of the Center, an early service provided by

the volunteers, has continued. Now Docents provide friendly, knowledgeable persons at the entrance to the Center to greet newcomers and perform other tasks. As part of their orientation, new docent volunteers become acquainted with Center personnel and program.

Volunteer Initiated Activities

The Andrus Volunteers have also initiated many projects. Their educational activities are designed to increase understanding of the aging processes and thus improve the quality of life for themselves and other older persons. Their first effort, an experimental class funded through the adult education division of the public schools, brought together 25 men and women from different backgrounds who became recruiters, organizers, curriculum developers, students, and teachers. Six years ago they began a seminar series called "Aging: Today's Research and You," designed to translate research findings in gerontology into lay language for older adults.

Publications written or edited by the Volunteers include the lectures from two of the seminar series; a monograph describing the first two years of the program's development entitled Releasing the Potential of the Older Volunteer; Who Me--A Leader?, a workbook on volunteer leadership training; A Blood Pressure Program For Senior Adults; and the Volunteer News which appears five times a year.

The Speakers Corps was formed to fill many requests to speak to community groups on age-related topics such as "Successful Aging," "Never Too Late to Learn," "Nutrition: Food for Mind and Body," "Planning for Retirement," and "Sexuality and Aging."

The Leadership Development Project, PEERS: Preparing Experts Educated as Resources for Seniors, was designed by fifteen Andrus Volunteers who planned the curriculum, prepared themselves to teach other older adults, produced an audiovisual slide/tape presentation and a workbook to develop volunteer leadership for program serving seniors. Through this project, Andrus Volunteers discovered how to work with their volunteer leader counterparts and paid staff in different kinds of organizations in the community, thus expanding opportunities for older volunteers to serve other older adults.

Research projects initiated by the Volunteers include "Organizational Response to Older Volunteers" and "Life Enrichment Through Humor In Long Term Care Facilities." The latter was a pilot study to explore the therapeutic use of humor as an intervention technique using carefully selected programs and activities at a nearby nursing home. A how-to manual based on the Volunteers' experiences is now in progress.

Community Service Roles

As a result of their involvement in the program, several Andrus Volunteers have been asked to participate on behalf of older adults in other city, county, state, and national organizations such as the California Life Care Contract Board, the Los Angeles County Adult Day Care Health Planning Council, the UCLA/USC Long Term Care Gerontology Center, the State and White House Conferences on Aging, the annual meetings of the Western Gerontological Society and the Adult Education Association. The findings and recommendations of the "Humor" project were presented at the International Gerontological Meeting in Hamburg, Germany by an Andrus researcher.

Structure

The structure of the Andrus Volunteer Program is compatible with that of the Gerontology Center. The Program is administered by a coordinator and an elected Executive Committee who operate according to by-laws developed by the volunteers. All active members serve on one or

more of the following committees: Advocacy, Docents, Education, Membership, Nominating, Office, Ways and Means, Leadership Development, Newsletter, Research, Speakers Corps, Standing Rules, and Special Activities. The committee system, an integral component of the volunteer structure since its inception, provides the volunteers with the opportunity to participate in a variety of tasks and options. Co-chairpeople of each committee share responsibilities of leadership.

Wednesday is "meeting day." These morning meetings of Andrus Volunteers, as a whole or in committees, from September to June, provide the structure for a formal and informal exchange of information and personal interaction. They serve a triple purpose in that they provide a forum for the exchange of information about gerontology and the various activities of the Andrus Volunteers; structure the volunteer program by receiving and evaluating requests for volunteer service made by staff and students and by groups from the wider community; and afford members an effective support group.

The Andrus Volunteers adhere to the concept that each member has the right and responsibility to find his/her own niche and to make a contribution to the program.

These are a few of the highlights of Andrus Volunteer involvement. It is apparent from their productivity that they have generated ways of relating to one another and to their work that releases person power and potential. More exciting even than the ever-evolving things they do is the feeling of mutual support and encouragement they give to one another. To some they have become a network of friends and an extended family. The norms and expectations which they have established for themselves encourage cooperation, innovation, and some risk-taking. They have demonstrated how to combine their goals with those of the institution by developing tasks that serve the central purpose of the organization and consequently have meaning for them. As they have discovered their functions, they have evolved structures that permit both flexibility of time commitment and movement from task to task. They have established both a context and content of work that has met their needs.

GUIDELINES FOR BUILDING OLDER VOLUNTEER PERSONNEL

Activating Older Volunteer Personnel

The Coordinator of Volunteers who is employed to help senior volunteers establish themselves and flourish in an organization should think about the potential volunteers, the work they may undertake, and the organizational setting in which they will work (both the existing arrangements and the structure the volunteers will create in order to govern themselves and their work). The Coordinator should operate in the belief that the older volunteers will generate meaningful work to reflect their own needs and interests (if they assume development of the older volunteer personnel) and respond to the needs and interests of the organization (if they are able to work closely with the paid personnel and "consumers").

The volunteers must share from the outset the challenge of opening opportunities for non-traditional workers in this setting and take the responsibility for inducting older adults into the organization if they are to be in charge of what they do. The Coordinator's first task is to locate a few individuals who respond favorably to the challenge of finding out what contribution older volunteers can make to the organizations. (The Andrus experience suggests that men and women who take up this challenge are likely to be experienced problem solvers who enjoy helping people organize and get things done.) The next task for the Coordinator is to help these potential volunteers get acquainted with one

another, the work and workers in the organization, and to assess where their own talents can be used. Once they decide where and how to begin, interact enough to offer one another support for their efforts, and consider ways to evaluate the results of their work, they have become active volunteers. The Coordinator brings to their attention volunteer opportunities suggested by staff and also encourages the volunteers to explore their own ideas about creating programs that meet the objectives of the organization. Together, Coordinator and volunteers address obstacles they face in gaining acceptance in the organization and in developing the cadre of volunteers to perform the tasks that become more numerous as the volunteers establish a track record of service.

The Coordinator provides continuity for the volunteers, giving them information about events that take place between the times that they are present, and a locus for the paid staff to request volunteer services and provide feedback as to results. As the numbers of volunteers and the kinds of work increase, the Coordinator performs more complex tasks serving as bridge, advocate, interpreter, trouble shooter, colleague, leader, mediator, and lender of vision.

The organizational structure created by the volunteers to govern themselves and their work should be independent but closely articulated with the structure of the parent organization. An independent, volunteer-directed structure is important for several reasons:

1. The volunteers need to take charge of the recruitment and maintenance of the volunteer personnel who may then work under the supervision of paid personnel, or under volunteer direction for volunteer-initiated work.
2. The older volunteers need to develop their own peer group, one that responds to their common circumstance of being retired unpaid workers in the midst of non-retired employees, and one that is designed for their personal growth and support as well as to meet the needs of the workplace.
3. The volunteers need to generate a range of tasks to accommodate individuals with different talents, especially administrative, managerial, and professional work which may not be available when volunteers are organized by paid personnel who retain the management roles.

Close articulation between the structure generated by the volunteers and the existing structure is essential. Communication must be maintained between volunteers and their paid counterparts in order to exchange information, develop complementary tasks, and evaluate outcomes in relation to organizational goals. The volunteers' existence is almost totally dependent upon their capacity to operate within the constraints of the organization, and to gain access to and expand its resources. They must, therefore, establish structure and relationships that are compatible.

The work itself brings together the interests of the volunteer and the organization. To be meaningful, the work must (1) induce the volunteers' psychological development, and (2) help to accomplish the central goals of the organization. Meaningful tasks provide the volunteer a means for accomplishment, recognition, interest, challenge and growth (Herzberg in Pitterman, 1973; Seguin & O'Brien, 1976). If the work is to have clear and important meaning, both volunteers and paid personnel must be able to see the connection between the work the volunteers do and the outcomes for the organization. In addition, the work of the volunteers must complement (not compete with) the work of paid staff. Volunteers and paid workers may perform identical tasks, but if done by volunteers the work must be for the volunteers' own projects, not for

work normally done by a paid worker. As retired persons explore the dimensions of their evolving volunteer roles and the work they can do well, they acquire new knowledge and skill and they help paid staff accept and value their contribution.

Organizational Prerequisites

In order to help develop a cadre of older volunteers in an established organization the following conditions must either be present at the outset or established through demonstration.

Older volunteers must be able and permitted to help accomplish the central mission of the organization, otherwise they will be auxiliary. Older adults, for example, cannot readily be denied access to a gerontology center that studies aging processes and prepares professionals to work with old people and on their behalf. How older adults can contribute to the productivity of an organization where the connection is less clear would need to be explored.

The organizational structure must permit innovation and tolerate differences. Introduction of volunteer personnel will require innovations, such as:

1. A set of policies for volunteer personnel different from those that govern paid personnel.
2. Work that complements or supplements tasks performed by paid employees.
3. Cooperation between paid staff and volunteers in getting and deploying resources required to reach their common goals.
4. A location for the volunteer personnel as close as feasible to the center of the administrative structure.

The organization must be willing to allocate enough resources for older volunteers to demonstrate their value. A minimal commitment of resources is required to start up and to continue the support of volunteer personnel. These resources include:

1. Financial support for a competent, paid Coordinator of Volunteers who is integrated into the central structure of the organization. To perform a bridging function, the Coordinator of Volunteers must have access to paid personnel as well as volunteers. To provide continuity for part-time volunteers, the Coordinator should be full-time.
2. Fiscal support for volunteers' out-of-pocket expenses, an important consideration for retired persons with limited incomes who often cannot afford to give both time and money.
3. Physical space, supplies, and equipment both for efficient work and for social interaction as a group. Suitable facilities for social interaction in the work place are vital, both for the morale of the volunteers and for the exchange of work-related information to stimulate innovation and effective growth.
4. Rewards to the volunteers through recognition by paid personnel. The most obvious recognition of the value of volunteers is their utilization throughout the organization and acknowledgement of their services.

The organization must attract potential older volunteers by providing:

1. Stimulating relationships with others in the organization.
2. "Real" work that is important, needed and recognized; and that can be done within the time, talent, and energy constraints of the older volunteer.
3. Positive identification for the individual through affiliation with the organization. This is an important consideration for retirees who can no longer identify themselves by stating their occupation.

Personnel in the organization must accept older volunteers. The psychological climate should be positive both toward older persons and volunteers. The retirement process by which older workers are separated from the workplace may have overtones of prejudice against older

adults that could reactivate feelings of rejection in retired volunteers and reinforce ageist stereotypes in younger workers should they feel threatened by more experienced workers in their midst. On the other hand, retirees who volunteer may be welcomed for their unique contribution without posing a job threat to young employees.

Similarly, attitudes about volunteer work are a factor. Most people have definite (often unspoken) feelings about unpaid volunteer work that are likely to surface when the idea of bringing volunteers aboard as full partners with paid personnel is introduced. Without the exchange of money, paid workers and volunteers alike may have difficulty conceptualizing the contract between the individual worker and the organization. Money is also used to symbolize the worth attached to the work, or to the worker, or to both. Feelings about "free" work may range from "whatever is worth doing is worth being paid for" to "tender loving care cannot be bought, but only freely given." The climate should be tested at all levels--with decision makers, boards, and staff; with line workers and support staff; and with "consumers"--to determine whether or not volunteers have at least a fifty-fifty chance of ultimate acceptance in the organization.

SUMMARY

The Andrus Volunteers, by their presence and through their work, have facilitated understanding among the generations and have demonstrated how successful cooperation can take place between paid employees and unpaid volunteer workers.

At the same time, the Volunteers have created within the Center productive volunteer work roles for retired persons. They have done this by taking charge of the volunteer personnel, then designing a volunteer structure closely articulated with that of the parent organization, and finally by identifying tasks that complement those of paid workers. Volunteer membership has increased and stabilized during the process, expanding the resources of the Center for the benefit of the community. Bridges have been built between the Gerontology Center and the wider community, especially the older population, through volunteer projects which help translate research findings into understandable concepts for the lay person and bring the concerns of older persons to the attention of the gerontologists.

In these and other evolving ways, the Andrus Volunteers have added a unique dimension to the work of this organization. At the same time, they have produced valuable evidence and guidelines for similar partnerships between paid workers and volunteers within other organizations--thus opening up opportunities and new frontiers for older volunteers.

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