Recruiting Black and Hispanic Volunteers: A Qualitative Study of Organizations' Experiences

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Volunteers are an important human resource for a variety of organizations and institutions in American society. In 1974 (the most recent year when a national study of volunteering was performed), close to 37 million Americans devoted some time to doing volunteer work (ACTION, 1975). The total economic value of this time was estimated as being $33.9 billion yearly, an amount less than its real value because the typical volunteer's time was calculated to be worth the minimum wage (Wolozin, 1976).

The traditional image of the volunteer--an affluent woman with extensive leisure time--is a narrow view of reality. Recent historical studies and current empirical data have shown that volunteers are a diverse group (Ellis and Noyes, 1978; ACTION, 1975). However, several social characteristics are closely linked with volunteering: whether or not an individual engages in volunteer work is significantly influenced by sex, age, income, educational achievement and race (Chambré, 1980; Morgan, Dye and Hybels, 1977; ACTION, 1975). The Americans Volunteer--1974 study found that whites were about twice as likely to be volunteers as nonwhites; approximately one-quarter of the whites and one-eighth of the nonwhites surveyed indicated that they had done organized volunteer work during the previous year (ACTION, 1975).

Volunteer administrators in social service agencies have been concerned with expanding the pool of volunteers, particularly the number of nonwhites. (Richards and Polansky, 1959; Chapin and Mok, 1979; Cruz, 1978; National Center for Voluntary Action, 1976; Grindel, 1969). Increasing nonwhite participation is intended to have several practical effects: 1) expand the actual number of volunteers; 2) have a more diverse group receive the benefits of doing volunteer work; 3) improve the quality of services provided when similarities between volunteers and clients are beneficial; and 4) expand the range of opinions represented when volunteers serve in an advisory capacity.

This article reports some of the findings of a larger project on recruitment of minority volunteers (Chambré, 1980). The study was conducted under the auspices of Big Brothers, Inc. of New York City and was supported by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The purpose of the project was to identify strategies for recruiting black and Hispanic big brothers and big sisters. This article describes the results of a survey of organizations concerning successful methods for attracting minority volunteers.

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Although volunteers serve a variety of significant functions and are crucial to the existence of many organizations, most social service agencies currently rely upon paid staff members to provide the bulk of direct services to clients. Big Brother/Big Sister agencies are unique in their continued reliance upon volunteers as a major source of direct services to individuals on a long-term basis. Thus, for these agencies, increased participation of black and Hispanic volunteers is particularly crucial, given the large number of minority children from single parent families who would benefit from having contact with a minority volunteer.

METHODOLOGY

Seventy-one unstructured interviews were conducted with individuals who were knowledgeable about or who had had direct experience with the recruitment of black and/or Hispanic volunteers. Those included in the sample were identified in three ways: they were working in organizations which had specifically recruited black or Hispanic volunteers; they were identified by another individual in the sample as being knowledgeable about the subject; or they served as directors of volunteers for organizations which were either located in or which served black or Hispanic neighborhoods.

Table 1 indicates the distribution of respondents according to the nature of the organization they worked for or the reason why they were included in the sample.

Due to time constraints, most respondents were interviewed by telephone. The interviews were unstructured; therefore, the questions asked were based on the particular knowledge, interests and experience of the respondent. Almost all of the interviewees were associated with interracial organizations. A substantial number voluntarily identified themselves as being either black or Hispanic. This information was not systematically recorded.

FINDINGS

The respondents expressed consensus on two general points: 1) that a well-designed volunteer program would attract minority volunteers; and 2) that recruitment of minority volunteers is affected by the overall characteristics of an organization.

With respect to the first finding, respondents pointed out that:

> *Minority volunteers can be recruited using the same techniques as those used for all volunteers. However, some special efforts must also be made and volunteer administrators must be sensitive to the unique needs of minority volunteers.*

This observation, expressed either extemporaneously or as a response to a direct question, was held by virtually all of those who were interviewed. A well-designed and carefully administered volunteer program will attract black and Hispanic volunteers. The major difference is that an organization must work harder to find minority volunteers and be sensitive to their special needs. The following statement summarizes this viewpoint:

> *Recruiting _____ is no different from recruiting anyone else . . . . You need to place a concerted effort to recruit them . . . . They must be made to feel they can give . . . . Tell them they need to come forth . . . . Don't make them feel as if they are tokens because that is resented. If you want them, you can get them.*

A second area of agreement concerns the effect of the organization itself rather than specific recruitment techniques.

> *All features of an organization influence whether or not an individual will volunteer. Minority volunteers, as members of groups with traditionally low involvement outside their own communities, are particularly responsive to positive or negative cues.*

The literature on volunteer recruitment (National Center for Voluntary Action, 1976; Selvidge, 1978; Naylor, 1967) and respondents in this survey indicate that low participation by nonwhites may reflect the fact that organizations are "hard to reach" rather than nonwhites do not want to volunteer. Organizations interested in increasing nonwhite involvement should be aware that minority volunteers may be "pioneering" by moving into organizations outside of their communities. The prevailing opinion among respondents is that when compared to whites, nonwhites initially tend to be less confident about their own abilities and the value of their contribution. Organizations which have increased minority participation have extensively reexamined and, in some instances, substantially modified their programs and procedures.

These two findings are rather general and refer to all phases of a volunteer program. Several specific findings also emerged from the interviews. These are presented in an order which follows the temporal sequence of a volunteer's involvement with an organization. Many of the points are applicable to successfully recruiting volunteers from all backgrounds.

PROMOTE AWARENESS OF THE NEED FOR VOLUNTEERS AND THE BENEFITS TO BE DERIVED BY THE VOLUNTEER

Modern volunteer administration does not rely solely upon humanitarian social values to assure an adequate supply of people. Rather, organizations stimulate altruistic behavior by "recruiting" volunteers. As a first step, volunteer programs promote awareness of their existence and purpose, communicate the volunteer's role, stress the organization's need for volunteers and specify the kinds of benefits which can be derived.

When recruiting blacks and Hispanics, organizations should indicate the consistency between their own goals and methods and the needs and interests of minority communities. A recruiter for the Girl Scouts indicated that she stresses that major goals of her organization are shared by the black and Hispanic parents whose children's participation is being solicited and who themselves could also serve as adult leaders.

The volunteer's role must also be presented as achieving these mutually-shared goals. In the case of Big Brothers, I considered whether the method of service delivery (a one-to-one relationship between an adult volunteer and a child) is relevant to potential minority volunteers. Since the problems of young people are widespread in many minority communities, a one-to-one relationship may appear inconsequential since only one child at a time is affected. However, one respondent, himself an upwardly mobile Hispanic, indicated that a one-to-one relationship is appealing because: "All of the guys who've made it in the South Bronx have done so because someone took an interest in them."

In order to promote awareness on the part of potential volunteers, organizations should communicate a general need for participants and, simultaneously, a special need for black or Hispanic volunteers. Both messages should be clear. One volunteer administrator has found that specifying the precise number and types needed has proven valuable. Knowing that a finite number are needed signals to a potential volunteer that his or her participation would be a significant contribution rather than being part of a never-ending need for people.

In addition to specifying the number needed, experience has shown that clearly communicating the need for black and/or Hispanic volunteers is also beneficial. In the opinion of some respondents, the inclusion of photographs of blacks and Hispanics in promotional material is not sufficient. While clearly superior to ma-

terial excluding such photographs, it can also appear as "tokenism" if not done with sensitivity. To counteract the perception of tokenism, the tone and content of promotional material should strike a responsive chord in minority recruits, thereby signalling to them that the organization would be a place where they would be welcomed and feel comfortable. Benefits derived from participation should be clearly communicated to potential volunteers. Professionals who administer volunteer programs have come to recognize that a mixture of altruism and self-interest is an acceptable and valuable motivation. Organizations should therefore communicate clearly to all volunteers, particularly those who may be "pioneers," that they, too, will benefit.

A review of case records of minority big brothers and big sisters of Big Brothers, Inc. of New York City revealed two motives which exemplify altruistic self-interest. A number of individuals indicated that they had a particular interest in working with children. Others felt that they were particularly well-suited to the role because of their own childhood experiences growing up without fathers or in foster homes, the type of volunteer Sills (1957) labels as "veteran."

All of these findings suggest that systematic ways of promoting awareness should signal to the potential volunteer that an organization is an appropriate and also a comfortable context within which he or she might want to donate time. The following section considers how such messages should be communicated.

COMBINE MASS MEDIA AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION TECHNIQUES

A major difference of opinion pertained to the best medium of communication. Some respondents favored the use of mass media as the most efficient way of promoting awareness. Others contended that one-to-one contact and community organization techniques are the best methods for recruiting minority volunteers. A third viewpoint, which is endorsed here, is that a combination of the two approaches is the most consistent with the process of becoming a volunteer.

Mass Media

The use of newspapers, magazines, radio and television has the major advantage of reaching large numbers of people with relatively minimal effort. However, a negative by-product is that such publicity attracts individuals who may not be suited to the roles to be performed. Use of media may place an organization in the position of having to screen out a large number of people. Careful consideration must also be given to achieving this without damaging an organization's reputation, as ill-treatment can be communicated to others. To achieve this, some organizations have trained volunteers to screen over the telephone, thus lessening the burden on paid staff.

A combination of media efforts directed to varied audiences as well as to minority audiences will ensure that a broad range of individuals will be informed. When a foreign language is used, individuals with a limited fluency in English will respond. If this would disqualify an individual, then commercials and advertisements should clearly specify that fluency in English is a prerequisite.

Newspapers with a focused circulation--to communities, colleges, unions and businesses--should also be used. The inclusion of feature stories on current volunteers with a connection to the readership would simultaneously perform several functions: 1) promote awareness of the organization's purpose; 2) provide recognition of a particular volunteer's contribution; and 3) personalize the role to be performed by demonstrating it does not require exceptional abilities.

Community Organization

Volunteer administrators have profitably adopted community orga-

nization techniques to recruit members of groups with traditionally low involvement. The prevailing opinion among respondents is that recruitment of all volunteers, but particularly blacks and Hispanics, requires personalized efforts. Mass media is valuable but must be supplemented by direct appeals to individuals. The development of relationships with community groups enables an outside organization to tap new social networks while having the endorsement of an organization known within a particular community.

Scouting organizations have successfully adapted community organization techniques in recruiting youth and adult participants in inner-city areas. As a first step, they survey existing organizations. This enables them to assess the reputations of existing groups and their place in the local power structure. Local groups must be selected with great care; a coalition with an organization with a poor reputation will severely limit the success of a volunteer recruitment effort.

A second step is to establish a collaborative relationship with a local group. This should be viewed as an alliance which is beneficial to both parties. For example, Scouting organizations indicate to local groups that they have a program valuable to inner-city youth and also the expertise to implement it. The community group's contribution is crucial because it has access to other resources which are necessary for a program's success: a positive reputation, people, space and community contacts.

A potential problem in forming alliances is that an organization may overextend itself and be unable to follow-through on contacts which have been initiated. This has short-term as well as long-term implications as described in this excerpt from a Boy Scouts staff manual:

> *Knowledgeable Scouters are appalled at the percent of dropped or inactive units which occur in inner-city and rural areas . . . Project directors frequently reported ill-will on the part of the people toward Scouting, because someone had gone into their areas and unit sponsors made promises that either were not, or could not be, kept . . . Many people and sponsors seemed to have been disappointed by inferior or unsuccessful Scouting, thus creating this "burned over territory" condition when attempts were made to go in and try to organize again...at times, the memory of a bad experience in one church or school was reported during organizational attempts at a neighboring church or school . . . (Boy Scouts of America, 1973:25).*

A successful alliance with a community group should yield volunteers for several reasons. It promotes awareness of the organization's purpose and need for volunteers. The alliance itself communicates that there is a common interest between the organizations, serves as an endorsement by the community group, and signals to potential volunteers that they are likely to feel comfortable in the outside organization. Without any additional efforts, the alliance should yield volunteers. To ensure further success, recruitment should, however, also operate at another level: person-to-person activities should be instituted.

MAINTAIN THE INTEREST OF POTENTIAL VOLUNTEERS BY INSTITUTIONALIZING "TRIGGER EVENTS"

Studies of volunteering indicate that there is a gap in time between becoming aware of an opportunity and actually making a commitment. According to Sills (1957:102), deciding to volunteer is a two-step process. Actually becoming a volunteer requires that a "trigger event" transform vague interests and intentions into a tangible action. His study of the March of Dimes found that, most often, the trigger event involved an-

other person known to the volunteer--a belief shared by the respondents in this survey. The actions of another person serve to crystallize a decision which may have been under consideration for a substantial period of time.

Data from a study conducted in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania indicate that blacks more often relied upon other individuals to "trigger" their decision to volunteer than whites (Nehnevajsa and Karelitz, 1976). This is probably due to their more limited experience with volunteer organizations, particularly organizations outside of their own communities. Another individual provides assurance that the potential volunteer is qualified, that the role to be performed is an appropriate one, and that a particular organization will be receptive to his or her contribution.

Organizations should recognize the decision-making process of becoming a volunteer and develop procedures which sustain the potential volunteer's interests. Any minority recruitment effort must build in the role of a "trigger" by using staff, volunteers and community leaders to assist individuals in crystallizing their decision to volunteer. Several strategies have been used to achieve this.

Some organizations have used influential community leaders, formal as well as informal, to identify and, in effect, "nominate" potential volunteers. The use of nominators personalizes the recruitment process and signals to an individual that an influential person has identified him or her as a potential volunteer.

A second approach is to hold gatherings of current and potential volunteers. This technique simultaneously serves as a "trigger" and a way of initially orienting potential volunteers. It further personalizes the role to be played because recruits can discuss the nature of the role to be performed with current volunteers.

A third trigger-like activity is a more impersonal one which involves the inclusion of phrases in recruitment appeals that crystallize the decision to volunteer. For example, a message such as "if you've wanted to be a ____ for a long time, now is the time to do it," provides recognition of the decision-making process and, with little effort, would perform the trigger function for some individuals.

ENSURE THAT SCREENING AND ORIENTATION DO NOT TURN OFF POTENTIAL VOLUNTEERS

Organizations typically screen potential volunteers to ensure that they are not given inappropriate responsibilities and, when they provide direct services, to ensure an adequate quality of services. In order to be certain that responsibilities will be carried out and the individual understands the nature of the organization, volunteers generally receive an orientation.

Screening and orientation may weed out inappropriate individuals but may also screen out potentially valuable people. The respondents indicated that minority volunteers are generally more sensitive to the negative cues at this stage of the process. Black volunteers, in particular, are especially sensitive to any implication that screening is intended to exclude individuals. If extensive screening is necessary, its rationale and relevance for both volunteer and organization should be explicit.

A significant gap in time between contacting an organization and assuming the volunteer role may unintentionally communicate to a potential volunteer that he or she is either not needed or is not wanted. For this reason, the time involved in screening and orientation should be as short as possible. Sills' (1957) work on volunteering suggests that the time between gaining awareness and deciding to volunteer may already be considerable. At this point in the process, recruits may be impatient. A delay can be interpreted as a rejection, which may result in a person's loss of interest in doing any

volunteer work or in working for one particular organization.

SUMMARY

The relatively lower formal volunteer participation among nonwhites and the desire to expand their participation has presented volunteer administrators with a challenge. A number of organizations have spent significant time and effort developing ways of expanding nonwhite volunteering. This article summarizes the experiences of a number of organizations outlining some general perspectives and specific techniques for recruiting black and Hispanic volunteers.

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Table 1

Frequency Distribution of Individuals Who Were Interviewed by the Type of Organization in Which They Were Employed or the Reason Why They Were Included In the Sample

Organization or Reason Included	Number of Individuals
Youth Organizations	
Big Brothers	
National staff	3
Local agency staff	11
Boy Scouts	
National staff	1
New York region	2
Girl Scouts	
National staff	2
New York region	2
Campfire	3
Other youth organizations	2
Mayor's Voluntary Action Center	6
Hospitals and health organizations	14
Humanities*	4
National Center for Citizen Involvement staff	2
Child welfare	4
Citizen's Committee for New York City	2
Volunteer coordinators, other organizations	5
Familiar with volunteer administration	5
Familiar with Black and/or Hispanic lifestyles	2
Total	71

*Participants in the National Center for Citizen Involvement's project on recruitment of hard-to-reach volunteers.