

Local Service Delivery: Volunteers and Recreation Councils

Vincent L. Marando

The involvement of volunteers in local government is widespread and is not a new phenomenon.¹ Awareness and interest among public officials concerning the advantages of involving volunteers are increasing. Existing fiscal constraints, as well as reduced federal aid, have underscored the need for local governments to consider alternative service delivery mechanisms, including the involvement of volunteers.² Many localities throughout the country are engaging in a fundamental rethinking of public services which includes renewed appreciation of volunteers.³

Volunteers often are perceived as being a potential resource for enhancing or maintaining local government services as well as to aid in reducing costs.⁴ As it will be argued, the attractiveness of volunteers to local government can be enhanced by addressing several management and organizational structure issues. The involvement of volunteers in the delivery of local government services provides a critical linchpin between the community and government in contemporary society.⁵

There have been few systematic studies examining the implications of how localities involve volunteers in service delivery. This article presents an exploratory case study of volunteer involvement in recreation service delivery in ten Maryland counties. The basic assumption examined is that the organizational structure of county recreation departments in Maryland facilitates volunteer involvement and affects the cost and nature of services delivered. Further, how recreation departments are structured effects the recruitment, motivation and retention of volunteers. Several Maryland counties rely heavily upon an organizational structure for service delivery known as Recreation Councils (RCs).

The objective of this study of ten Maryland counties is to examine how the structure of Recreation Councils affects volunteer involvement. The relationships between volunteers and local government are discussed in response to the following questions: Is recreational department structure related to stimulating and expanding volunteer involvement? Do volunteers lower recreation department service delivery costs? Do volunteers affect the delivery of services? Is there an impact on the quality and quantity of services in the counties where volunteers are involved? The article concludes with some observations on the implications of the Maryland study for local government structure and the involvement of volunteers.

MARYLAND STUDY DESIGN

County government authorizes the establishment of Recreation Councils. Once established, RCs and their member volunteers influence county recreation policy and affect several aspects of involving other volunteers in recreation service delivery. The relationship between counties and Recreation Councils is interactive in nature. That is, although counties provide volunteers the opportunity to create Recreation Councils, once created, RCs influence county government recreation programs. For example, the RCs influence the extent of county support for recreation.

Further, the existence of Recreation Councils and the extent to which counties depend on them for service delivery affect:

- a. the extent of volunteer involvement;
- b. volunteer contributions to service delivery;
- c. volunteer influence and advocacy for recreation quantity and quality; and

Vincent Marando is a Professor with the Institute for Urban Studies at the University of Maryland. He is co-author of *The Forgotten Governments* and *The State and the Metropolis*, and has volunteered extensively for Maryland recreation activities.

d. volunteer-staff relationships.

The study design used in this research is exploratory in nature. How volunteers are involved in service delivery could not be specified with precision prior to analysis. It was assumed that the relationships between volunteers and local governments are complex and diffused. These relationships cannot be subjected to rigorous quantitative and statistical testing. There are multiple interactions between volunteers, Recreation Councils and counties. The historical evolution of volunteer participation in recreation and the wide variation in local approaches to volunteerism suggested exploring the nature of the subject, rather than testing the relationships.⁶ The structure of how volunteers are organized by Recreation Councils is important to many aspects of participation, such as recruitment and retention. Those interested in volunteer participation in recreation services, in other states and localities across the country, should find the Maryland experience of value in assessing their own approaches.

In Maryland, the county is the primary unit of local government for service delivery. Historically, residents in Maryland have relied upon counties, not cities, to provide local government services. In fact, 75 percent of Maryland residents do not live in incorporated cities. Where they exist, cities expand upon and supplement county services, rather than function as comprehensive and independent recreation delivery units. In addition, Baltimore City, the state's largest jurisdiction, also has the legal distinction of being a county. It is through its legal status as a county that many of Baltimore City services are delivered.

Ten of Maryland's twenty-four counties are included in this case study as indicated in Table I. The ten counties selected account for approximately 70 percent of the state's total population. The counties were selected to offer a reasonable cross-section of all counties in terms of urbanization, size, wealth, public services provided and existence of Recreation Councils. Data in the form of county budgets, personnel documents, and volunteer participation records were

collected from the ten counties. The Maryland State Department of Natural Resources provided data on all counties to supplement and provide a state-wide context for the ten counties examined.

The data presented in Table I were complemented with twenty-six in-depth interviews. The interviews ranged from one to three hours in length and several individuals were interviewed more than once. The interviews were conducted with county elected officials, recreation staff, and volunteers. In addition, interviews were held with state public officials and officials representing the Maryland Park and Recreation Association. The central focus of all the written data and interviews was to assess volunteer involvement at the operational service delivery level, rather than volunteer participation on advisory boards.⁷

RECREATION COUNCILS

The study examined the extent to which counties encouraged and relied upon Recreation Councils for involving volunteers in service delivery.⁸ Recreation Councils are local volunteer bodies, usually community based, that make recreation policy and deliver most recreation services within their area jurisdictions. A model was developed outlining recreation department structure characteristics and is presented in Figure 1. The model proves useful in presenting the characteristics of a formal Recreation Council particularly with respect to understanding the extent of decentralization and volunteer involvement. The ten recreation departments exhibit varying commitments to either a centralized or decentralized structure in the delivery of local services. A key variable in explaining a county's centralized-decentralized structure is the existence and the extent of the county's reliance upon Recreation Councils. Although RCs are legally authorized by the county, their creation is initiated by *volunteers*.

Volunteers create RCs to structure their activities and give continuity to their efforts. The creation of a Recreation Council institutionalizes volunteer efforts and structures involvement in recreation among the volunteers. Several RCs created thirty years ago are still function-

TABLE I. Selected Characteristics of 10 County Recreation
Departments in Maryland, 1981-1982.

COUNTY	STRUC- TURE*	1980 POPULA- TION	TOTAL OPERATING EXPENDITURES	PER CAPITA EXPEN- DITURES	Personnel					
					FULL	PART	LOSS FROM PREVIOUS YEAR	GAIN	VOLUNTEERS	VOLUNTEER CONTRIBUTION ESTIMATE
Anne Arundel	MD	375,000	3,924,690	\$12.41	74	400 2300S	40** 12S	---	3,303	\$1,360,275
Baltimore Co.	D	645,031	8,088,548	\$12.29	248	177	81**	---	42,861	9,719,187
Baltimore City	C	786,775	11,291,000	\$14.34	524	86 FTE	158.5 FTE	---	2,662	2,425,460
Carroll	D	97,280	137,680	\$ 1.82	5	11	1**	1	3,295	528,785
Frederick	D	117,106	389,552	\$ 3.65	18	60	---	---	75	18,750
Howard	C	125,365	1,564,460	\$ 9.42	36	378	3	5	800	200,000
Montgomery	C	582,000	26,948,330	\$37.28	625	18 FTE	9**	15	2,320	580,000
Prince George's	D	665,565	25,357,980	\$28.67	550	30	5**	11	9,500 1,700S	4,800,000
Washington	---	113,086	389,552	\$ 6.71	17	15	8**	---	12	3,000
Wicomico	MD	64,500	506,032	\$ 6.88	18	170	10**	2	350	87,500

* -refers to department structure
C -Centralized
D -Decentralized
MD -Moderately Decentralized
** -CETA Employees

S - Seasonal
FTE- Full Time Equivalent

ing, although none of the original volunteers continues to participate. Thus, although individual volunteers pass from the recreation scene, RCs nurture and give continuity to community volunteerism.

Recreation Councils are not in existence in all counties and the extent of authority granted to them by local ordinances varies. In some counties RCs are legally constituted bodies with formal authorities, whereas in other counties they are informal associations of volunteers.

A formal RC has the following characteristics: a constitution, elected officers, a regular meeting time, a budget, fundraising capacity and an identifiable geographic boundary. In those areas where formal RCs exist, they deliver and extensively finance most recreation services. The RCs determine program content, schedule sporting events, and provide staff such as coaches and referees. These activities are financed to a large extent by RCs which utilize various forms of fundraising such as activity registration charges, user fees and, of course, individual and group contributions. Only large capital expenditures and specialized county recreation functions such as indoor swimming pools, horse riding facilities, and the like, are not delivered by Recreation Councils.

Those counties that rely on formal Recreation Councils also exhibit a decentralized decision-making approach to service delivery. Recreation policy and service delivery are extensively provided at the community level by volunteers through their RCs.⁹ In the counties where the formal RC form of organization exists, the recreation department functions primarily as coordinator, facilitator and program resource specialist in supporting RC activities. Paid county professionals are assigned to Recreation Councils to assist them in carrying out their programs. In such areas, the role of paid professional county staff is to support and facilitate the RCs' programs.¹⁰

VOLUNTEERS: INVOLVEMENT AND INFLUENCE

The involvement of volunteers in service delivery and reliance on Recreation Councils range widely among the ten

counties and are related to other factors as well. The extent of a county's taxable resource base and its historical development for providing recreation services also affect volunteer involvement. Wealthy counties have less fiscal need for relying upon volunteers to deliver services. Separate from county wealth, the historical development of service delivery impacts upon volunteer involvement. Less affluent jurisdictions with tax resource limitations and high concentrations of low income persons, such as Baltimore City, have historically approached recreation as a public responsibility to be financed and delivered by local government. Although it was not possible to conclusively separate and account for the independence of recreation councils from factors such as wealth and historical context, RCs enhance volunteer involvement under all circumstances.

By contrast, counties that are not confronted by fiscal constraints can "afford" not to involve many volunteers. It was argued by several persons interviewed that relying upon Recreation Councils necessitates a trade-off between gaining volunteer support and diminishing county public officials' control over programs. Although elected officials and their appointed managers retain public responsibility for service delivery, the extent of their direct control over programs is altered by extensive reliance upon volunteers. An extreme position of this argument was taken by several public officials from the more affluent counties. They argued that decentralized departments were "holding companies" for RCs which were, in reality, the recreation departments.

The extent to which a recreation department relies on RCs stimulates volunteer involvement. As shown in Table I, Baltimore County relies most upon volunteers by involving more than 42,000. Prince Georges County, the second most populated local jurisdiction in the state, has a decentralized department having 92 Recreation Councils and also involves many volunteers. In contrast, Baltimore City and Montgomery County, which are also large local jurisdictions, involve far fewer volunteers: 2,662 and 2,320, respectively. For the smaller counties,

Informal RC Formal RC

Montgomery Co.	Ann Arundel Co.*	Baltimore Co.
Howard Co.	Wicomico Co.	Carroll Co.
Baltimore City-Co.		Frederick Co.
Washington Co.		Prince George's Co.

Centralized	Decentralized
1. County-wide <ol style="list-style-type: none">leaguesregistrationrefereescoaches	1. Recreational Councils (RC) <ol style="list-style-type: none">formal charterpriority use of county facilitiesprogram formulationcoaches
2. Single county-wide budget	2. Recreation Council has budget
3. Professional staff has authority and responsibility for delivering all county recreation programs	3. County personnel assigned to assist recreational councils
4. County maintains facilities	4. Recreation Council maintains facilities
5. County government raises a majority of resources	5. Recreation Councils raise a majority of resources

*RCs in Ann Arundel and Wicomico Co. exhibit a combination of the informal and formal characteristics. They are not county authorized but have many characteristics of decentralization.

Figure 1. Classification of County Recreation Council structure and model of Centralization-Decentralization of Service delivery.

Washington and Wicomico offer a striking contrast. Washington County has a centralized department and volunteers are much less relied upon. By comparison, Wicomico, the smallest county examined, relies extensively upon volunteers.

Several counties with centralized recreation departments did not record the number of volunteers involved in service delivery. In these counties oral estimates of volunteer involvement were the only source of data on the extent of volunteer involvement. These oral estimates were not only approximate, but had a possible margin of error of $\pm 50\%$. On the other hand, recreation staffs in decentralized counties utilized written tallies of volunteer involvement. In addition, officials from counties having decentralized structures appended Recreation Council reports to the annual county budget, documenting volunteer involvement by illustrating the savings and the services they provided.¹¹ The availability, precision and accuracy of county records on volunteer contributions and their incorporation into county budget requests offer support to the linkage between RCs and involvement of volunteers. Those counties that kept records of involvement were the same counties that relied most on Recreation Councils to involve volunteers. These counties utilized a form of "No-Apologies Budget" as described by Neil Karn.¹² Volunteers are an integral part of the delivery system and their contributions were recorded and used as part of the county's justification for public funding.

The study strongly suggests that Recreation Councils stimulate and increase the involvement of volunteers, although the relationship is subtle and complex. The RCs provide a community context within which volunteers can see the value of their contributions, not only in their preferred recreation activity, but they also can see the benefit to children, neighbors and community. The RC acts as a recruiter and motivator of volunteers. Volunteers in this context are not only aiding a "recreation department" but they are aiding their community. The RC gives immediate and direct purpose, praise, community feedback, and reinforcement to volunteers.

Volunteers also do participate in recre-

ation service delivery on an individual basis, by-passing Recreation Councils. The specific nature of some activities, such as historical preservation and nature trail development, are not sufficiently broadly-based within a community to warrant the involvement of the RC. In these, and other specialized recreation activities, individual volunteers venture forth and offer their services and talents directly to the county recreation departments. These volunteers were not discouraged by county recreation staff from getting an activity started. However, volunteers received only modest support from the county until sufficient service demand was documented. For many recreational activities, individual or small groups of volunteers provided departments the "luxury" of experimenting with offering new programs and services.

THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEER CONTRIBUTIONS

Volunteer contributions to recreation departments are estimated in the last column of Table I. That is, through volunteer contributions the county budgets were expanded by the amounts reported in the last column. Recognizing that caution must be exercised in fixing any dollar value to volunteer time as cogently discussed by Neil Karn in this Journal, comparisons among the Maryland counties are offered.¹³ The figures were derived from staff estimates and calculations of county records based upon numbers of volunteers and hours contributed. Estimates of contributions are only approximate in that formal accounting of volunteer involvement is not required by law in Maryland. In spite of the many problems inherent in estimating volunteer contributions to recreation departments, it appears that they "save" recreation departments considerable resources. The study suggests that great care should be used in assessing savings. It was methodologically impossible to prove volunteer "savings" to recreation departments whose size and program content would have been significantly different without the involvement of volunteers in the first instance.¹⁴

The effect of volunteer involvement upon county per capita expenditures and

the size of staff was even less clear. These indicators of service delivery costs are as much related to county size and wealth as they are to volunteer involvement. There are limits to volunteer contributions to recreation departments. Volunteer contributions may, in fact, be allocated to extending the quality of recreational activities rather than exclusively in "saving" departments money in delivering the basic services. For example, the per capita expenditures for Baltimore County are quite similar, even though their reliance upon volunteers is of very different magnitudes. By contrast, Montgomery County, which does not rely extensively on volunteers, has a per capita recreation expenditure rate three times that of the two Baltimore area jurisdictions.

VOLUNTEER INFLUENCE: RECREATION ADVOCATES

Volunteers encourage county expenditures while they contribute resources to recreation departments. Several interviewees indicated that volunteer requests and often their demands stimulate counties to provide more and higher quality recreation services. In Maryland, volunteers function as lobbyists to protect the recreation budget from expenditure cuts and in many instances exert pressure for increased expenditures. With the exception of Baltimore City, which is experiencing cuts, the remaining nine county recreation budgets have remained stable or, in fact, have grown. Recreation departments account for about two to three percent of the counties' total operating budgets. This base proportion of the budget, *vis a vis* other local services, has not shrunk during the past decade. Although recreation is not considered a vital service, it fared no worse than other services. The role of volunteers at budget time appears to be important in the process of allocating public resources.

Interviews with public officials and staff indicated that recreation, at least in Maryland, is considered an important and necessary service. This is contrary to a general impression in recent literature that recreation is less necessary and more expendable than other local services such as law enforcement and education.¹⁵ The

value of recreation is communicated to the public by volunteers who gain a greater understanding, appreciation, and commitment by their involvement in providing services.

In addition, volunteer involvement supplements a growing trend toward greater reliance by local government to "privatize" services by financing recreation by user fees. Many local governments are following a strategy of charging fees to persons who use facilities and engage in specific recreational activities.¹⁶ This trend toward increased reliance on user fees is supported by general public acceptance. Volunteers play a role in keeping the actual costs of user fees below the market rate charged by private producers. Thus, the county user fees charged for recreation activities are made comparative "bargains" due to volunteer contributions.

VOLUNTEER - STAFF RELATIONSHIPS

Volunteers are being recognized by recreation staff as a necessary ally for protecting funding commitments and obtaining additional resources for program development. Interviews with professional recreation administrators indicated that they would find it more difficult to protect their organizational and budget "turfs" in the absence of volunteers. Contrary to some expectations, the interview data of this study support the contention that volunteers do not take the jobs of paid staff.¹⁷ Rather, volunteers protect staff jobs and quite possibly stimulate the need for more staff assistance. Volunteers and professional staff accommodate one another in seeking increased support for trained personnel to deliver programs in such areas as better officiating, modern training techniques, and more professional care of sports injuries.

Although volunteers and paid staff are generally accommodating of one another, the dominance of the two groups varies according to department structure. In centralized recreation departments it is the professional staff which has authority and involves volunteers in program activities. In these departments, staff-volunteer relations follow the commonly-accepted dictum of public administration that volunteers assist staff, who are in turn re-

sponsible for program delivery. By contrast, in decentralized recreation departments, volunteers are primarily responsible for service delivery. The volunteers take the lead and involve professional staff in support of program activities. In these counties the professional staff functions to give assistance to volunteer initiatives. Thus the roles of volunteers and professional staff are reversed. Where Recreation Councils exist, volunteers are both the primary policy makers and deliverers of services. Whereas in centralized departments, volunteers assist elected public officials and professional staff in delivering recreation services.

VOLUNTEERS AND SERVICE QUALITY

Evaluation of volunteer impact upon recreation service quantity and quality is currently based more on a philosophical orientation than empirical verification. The traditional program evaluation approaches that examine efficiency, effectiveness, and equity of service delivery do not conclusively document volunteer influence on quantity and quality. Accepted measures as per capita expenditures, per capita staff ratios, and the types and numbers of recreation facilities in a community are related to a number of conditions, of which volunteer involvement is only one factor. This study found that the value of volunteer involvement to local government is defined by the general perceptions of public officials and volunteers rather than empirical verification of program outputs.

Verification of volunteer involvement data provided by counties, using commonly relied upon evaluation procedures was inconclusive and contradictory. This study supports the observations of Neil Karn who indicates that volunteers can be valued, even though their impact is difficult or impossible to quantify.¹⁸ An assessment of volunteer impact on service delivery was found to be rooted in public, official and volunteer perceptions as well as in "hard" data.

In counties relying upon Recreation Councils, the involvement of large numbers of volunteers provided county officials sufficient justification for believing that recreation services were being delivered effectively. And similarly, the major

indicator of a successful program was the number of persons involved in recreation programs. This undoubtedly deserves further study. As financial constraints on local governments have increased, all jurisdictions to some extent have volunteer involvement to lower program costs and keep recreation a "free" or low cost service to residents.¹⁹

SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS

This exploratory study indicated that volunteer participation in recreation was found to be related to and stimulated by a decentralized approach to service delivery. Counties that relied on Recreation Councils not only involved large numbers of volunteers, but the delivery mechanism was dominated by volunteers. In the recreation departments observed in this study, increased volunteer involvement was an effective supplement to professional paid staff for providing services. In fact, this study found that, in counties with Recreation Councils, paid staff supplemented volunteers in delivering services. This study suggests that local policies that foster "localism" through organizational decentralization facilitate volunteer involvement.

Recreation is a relatively "elastic" service that can be delivered with various levels of public financing and organizational arrangements. An "elastic" service is one for which citizens will accept wide variations in the amount and quality of services provided. In contrast, for "inelastic" services such as public safety and education, citizens will demand minimum levels of service and be less likely to accept wide variations. Care must be exercised in inferring that the volunteer experiences found in recreation can be transferred in total to other services, especially inelastic services. However, for services which are elastic in character, such as libraries or home care support activities, a decentralized structure enhances volunteer involvement.

When compared to other local services, volunteer involvement in recreation is affected by the peculiar, if not unique, characteristics of that service. Volunteering is in itself a form of recreation. Volunteers enjoy their participation and view it as recreation itself. This perspective af-

fects recruitment and retention of volunteers. Recreation departments compete quite successfully for volunteers with other local service areas such as fire protection, and public and nonprofit assistance to persons in need. The availability and organizational strength of volunteers in recreation service delivery influences how public officials value volunteers. The success of involving volunteers in recreation in Maryland was primarily a function of volunteers organizing into units they themselves controlled and could use effectively.

This Maryland study suggests that localism in the form of Recreation Councils enhanced volunteer involvement with no apparent loss in service quality. Public officials and volunteers have worked out this mutually-agreeable relationship in delivering recreation service. Communities interested in involving volunteers in recreation services, as well as other services, should consider the organizational implications of decentralized arrangements.

FOOTNOTES

¹Alexis deTocqueville, *Democracy in America*, abridged edition. Translated by Henry Reeve, revised by Francis Bowen (ed.), (New York: Washington Square Press, 1964).

²Kerry Kenn Allen, *Worker Volunteering: A New Resource for the 1980's* (New York: AMACOM, Inc. 1980).

³Ted Kolderie, "Rethinking Public Service Delivery," *Public Management*, Vol. 64, No. 10, Oct. 1982 (Washington D.C.: International City Management Association), pp. 6-9.

⁴Alex N. Pattakos, "Volunteer Personnel," a report for International City Management Association, Washington, D.C., unpublished manuscript 1983; this report was revised and appears in Carl Valente and Lydia Manchester, *Rethinking Local Services: Examining Alternative Delivery Approaches* (Washington D.C.: ICMA, 1984), p.2.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Vincent L. Marando, *Local Recreation Service Delivery: Volunteer Involvement*, Memo-graph. A report submitted to the office of Policy Development and Research, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Washington, D.C., 1982.

⁷Volunteers were defined as persons who participated in service delivery for no direct remuneration and were not coerced into assisting county recreation departments. The receipt of modest stipends and out-of-pocket compensation such as mileage reimbursement from counties was deemed consistent with the notion of voluntarism. Alex N. Pattakos, "Volunteers and the Provision of Local Government Services: A Preliminary Issue Paper," prepared for the International City Management Association, Washington, D.C., 1982.

⁸See Pattakos, *op. cit.*, for a discussion on organization-management approaches to volunteer involvement.

⁹ACTION, *Americans Volunteer-1974* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975.)

¹⁰Interview with the Director of Recreation Programs of Baltimore County, July 1982.

¹¹G. Neil Karn, "The No-apologies Budget: How to Justify the Financial Support a Volunteer Program Deserves," *Volunteer Action Leadership*, Spring 1984, pp. 29-31.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹³G. Neil Karn, "Money Talks: A Guide to Establishing the True Dollar Value of Volunteer Time" (Parts I and II) *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, Winter 1982-83, pp. 1-17, and Spring 1983, pp. 1-19.

¹⁴Harry P. Hatry, *Alternative Service Delivery Approaches Involving Increased Use of the Private Sector* (Washington, D.C.: Greater Washington Records Center, 1983), see discussion on volunteers, pp. 67-74.

¹⁵Massachusetts Institute of Technology, *Impact 2-1/2*, Cambridge, Mass., No. 44/45, March 1, 1983.

¹⁶Paul B. Downing, "User Charges and Service Fees," in *Urban Consortium Information Bulletin* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research, January 1982).

¹⁷Aileen R. Lotz, "Alternatives in Health and Human Services," *Public Management* (Washington, D.C.: International City Management Association, 1982), p.11.

¹⁸Karn, "Money Talks" (Part I) *op. cit.*, p.16.

¹⁹Marando, *Local Recreation Service Delivery, Voluntarism, op. cit.*, p.3.