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ABSTRACT

Many volunteer projects are undertaken in partnership with government agencies. If such projects are to be successful it is important that volunteer organizers are aware of the possible conflict of interest between themselves and those with whom they must work. They will wish to ensure that the service they intend to provide appeals to politicians or board members, to managers and to professional staff. They cannot ignore the views of trade unions and the perceptions of those who use the service. Only by carefully considering the agendas of all these players, and responding to them, can an organizer ensure that a project receives the help and cooperation it needs. The organizer must be able to demonstrate how a new project will help all the players achieve their goals and, at the same time, provide a coherent service that benefits the local community.

Volunteering as Seen by Statutory Agencies: A British Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

In the United Kingdom health and social care services traditionally have been funded and provided for largely by government or local government and often are known as statutory agencies. This article, based on a workshop at the International Conference on Volunteer Administration in 1995, addresses issues that arise when volunteers work alongside statutory agencies, but many of them apply wherever volunteers serve in close association with professional staff.

The objectives of the workshop were for participants to:

- Discover why statutory agencies are sometimes less than enthusiastic about working with volunteers;
- Identify strategies to combat misunderstandings among people of influence about volunteers, and volunteering; and
- Learn how to ensure that services provided by volunteers are seen as

relevant, and are valued by statutory agencies.

There are three groups of people in statutory agencies who need to be persuaded about the value of volunteer activity: politicians or board members, senior managers, and professionals. In addition, trade unions and users and carers may represent powerful influences. Each group can identify both advantages and disadvantages in encouraging the development of a volunteer program. Volunteer organizers wishing to gain support for their projects need to understand the dynamics that motivate all the players in statutory agencies in order to ensure cooperation and funding.

POLITICIANS

Politicians and board members wish to carry out their duties in a way that gives confidence to those who elect or appoint them. To curry the favor of, or to work

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with volunteers may seem an inferior option. In some circumstances this perception will make it difficult to persuade politicians and board members to support a new volunteer project but, more often than not, a high-quality service that saves money will not only increase the esteem in which politicians are held, but also help them retain their position.

Impressive buildings and large numbers of staff are symbols of power, whereas volunteering often carries a low status especially when it is carried out by women. Politicians are prepared to say kind things in public about volunteers, but may not regard them as powerful players in their area of influence. If they are to agree to a new volunteer initiative they usually must be convinced that it will save overall expenditures or enable funds to be transferred to another area of concern.

Time and effort spent in researching the aspirations of political leaders can repay rich dividends. In the United Kingdom some statutory social service agencies are required by law to prepare a public document each year setting out areas of their work they plan to develop and to indicate priorities for creating new initiatives. The document is prepared in consultation with many other organizations to ensure that members of the public, industry, related organizations and staff are aware of budget intentions, particularly any changes that are being proposed. A volunteer organizer has a better chance of receiving financial support from a statutory social service agency if the project meets some of the objectives set out in the public document. Even if such a document is not available, a careful examination of public reports and political manifestos may reveal those areas of activity which are giving cause for concern, and where a proposal for developing a new service may be most welcome. Armed with knowledge of this kind, a volunteer organizer has a much better chance of submitting a proposal that will be taken seriously.

It is also important to research the work of other organizations in the chosen area of activity and to find partners. Nothing is

more certain to damage a proposal than if it appears to ignore the work already undertaken by others. *Prima donnas* are as disliked in public service as they are in the entertainment industry.

MANAGERS

Unless volunteer projects excite the enthusiasm of managers, it may be impossible to overcome the inertia that often stands in the way of new ideas and new approaches to old problems. The first instincts of managers may be to oppose the deployment of volunteers who are likely to be regarded as less predictable and less dependable than paid staff as well as difficult to control and discipline. Lines of accountability are more complex with volunteers than with staff. Where relationships with trade unions are already precarious, managers may not wish to introduce further complications.

Insurance may be an obstacle although it is probably more often proffered as an excuse rather than as a reason for not engaging volunteers. Circumstances can arise where, due to the actions of a volunteer, an agency may be sued by a member of the public. Insurance coverage can be obtained, but some agencies insist that the volunteer or an organization representing him/her pay the premiums.

Managers may find a proposal more attractive if it points to a way of saving money or increasing the quality and range of services offered. Managers may be prepared to argue the case for a project with the board if it has the potential to meet aspirations that cannot be satisfied in other ways. Even a lukewarm manager will be helpful if his or her board wishes to proceed.

PROFESSIONALS

Many professionals employed in health and social care services, particularly in the years immediately following training, are unsure of their roles. They are establishing relationships with other professionals which seem more important to them than developing an understanding of volunteers. It can be difficult for a professional

to admit that part of the role that s/he has been trained to perform can be undertaken by a relatively untrained and inexperienced member of the public. Wording to convince them needs to be chosen with great care if they are to be won over.

Volunteers make demands on the time of professionals and, unless there is an enthusiastic commitment, volunteers will soon detect that they are not valued. Volunteers also make demands on the time of managers and supervisors and, to some extent, may find themselves competing with junior professionals for the time and attention of senior staff.

The provision of health and social care services can be stressful. Staff often feel they need to unwind and tell anecdotes about their outrageous experiences with patients, clients, or other professional groups. It is satisfying to do this with like-minded professional colleagues, but the presence of volunteers in an office can be inhibiting. Objections about a proposal for a volunteer project sometimes arise because professionals feel uncomfortable about sharing their work environment with people who may be critical or lack understanding.

Of course some professionals are looking for new challenges. They see the possibilities of using their time to bring benefits to larger numbers of their clients by the judicious use of volunteers. They are prepared to invest time in developing a good project. For some, responsibility for a volunteer project helps to distinguish them from their professional colleagues, and may get them noticed by supervisors and managers. This may be true especially if they have writing skills, and can record their work in prestigious national publications. If it is possible to provide examples of successful projects involving professionals and volunteers, it may be easier to convince skeptics of the benefit that volunteers can bring to their professional practice.

TRADE UNIONS

The clear anxiety of trade unions is that job substitution may occur. If industrial

relations are satisfactory the issues can be debated sensibly, explanations given, and arrangements agreed upon. If relationships are already soured because of a pay dispute or a spate of redundancies—where jobs are lost because of downsizing—it is unlikely that the creation of a new volunteer project will be greeted with sympathy. Similarly, if negotiations are taking place about poor working conditions, a trade union will see the introduction of volunteers as weakening its position. Timing is always important.

There is no reason why trade unions should feel sympathetic to volunteerism. Leaving aside the fact that trade unions are themselves controlled and largely managed by volunteers, their role is to protect the interests of working people. Their power, prestige, and income rises as the workforce increases. Whatever benefits volunteers may bring to their members, they do nothing for the union.

Behind the rhetoric of trade union objections to volunteer projects is often not only a fear of job losses, but a perceived devaluation of the skills held by the work force. Once a trade union accepts that volunteers can assist staff, or undertake some roles which would otherwise require staff, their bargaining power is reduced.

Volunteers are praised and patronized by the media and by politicians whereas staff, particularly those employed in public services, tend to get the blame when things go wrong. Voluntary organizations sometimes find it helpful to include the name of a prominent trade unionist on their letterhead, for example someone on the governing committee who is known locally, who can intervene if a trade union raises objections to a proposal.

Although volunteerism in public services does not fit happily with trade union policies, individual union members have wider interests than the activities of their union. They see the need to engage members of the community in their work, and many of them want to participate in volunteer projects. They would not be willing to accept the public opprobrium that

would follow if their union refused to cooperate. The growth of volunteering among newly retired people suggests that many union members see the potential benefits of volunteering.

USERS AND CARERS

Users and carers want the best quality service available. Users are defined as older, disabled persons needing and using services. Carers are family members or neighbors who provide assistance. They may see involving volunteers as a substandard option. They do not necessarily recognize that front-line staff in domiciliary care services and in residential homes are often poorly trained and supervised. Users and carers also have another problem. It is much easier to accept that a relative needs expert care than to believe that, although you cannot cope, a relatively untrained volunteer can do the job. This situation has been recognized in the field of child care. Parents may be willing to accept residential care for a child, but object strongly to an attempt to place their child with foster parents. Volunteers and their organizers must be sensitive to the powerful emotions that are at work when family members feel unable to meet the needs of their relatives and turn to outside help.

On the other hand, once users and carers have experience with volunteers, they are likely to recognize that the role volunteers perform is quite different from a professional. Volunteers have more time and can take a more personal interest. Volunteers do not have the power to give or withhold a service, so the kind of relationship that they forge is different. Volunteers can sometimes help users and carers to make better use of the services available by acting as advisers and advocates. Once initial doubts have been overcome, users and carers may themselves become powerful advocates for volunteer services.

CONCLUSIONS

All the groups mentioned—politicians, managers, professionals, trade unions, and users and carers—have their own perceptions and their own agendas. It is instructive to ask whether volunteer organizers struggling to establish a new project are the only players with pure motives. Of course not! Apart from wanting to create a worthwhile project, they wish to ensure they carry out their duties in such a way that they continue to be paid. They want their jobs to be interesting, they want recognition, and possibly promotion. They may look forward to creating a project which will enable them to publish a book or to undertake a lecture tour.

So does it matter that there are self-interested sides to all our characters and that our motives are mixed? Our task is to have a clear vision of what we want to achieve for our clients, to identify and engage the legitimate aspirations of all the players, and to be sensitive to the downside for each party. We must demonstrate that the project we are promoting will help each set of players achieve its goals. The arguments we use will depend on the people we are addressing. It is important to work to strengths that are present, to go with the grain wherever possible, and to emphasize how the project will benefit those whom we are addressing. Written reports, which will be seen by several players, need to be carefully crafted so that each can identify a benefit that appeals.

Such an approach may be distasteful to some people, but negotiation is an essential part of human interaction. Successful salespeople know their customers' needs. Sales patter is carefully crafted to make the customer feel good, and demonstrate the product will meet all requirements. Good salespeople mention only one negative—the price—but will endeavor to show that the product is worth the price because of the benefits received.