

# Stalking the Elusive Male Volunteer

By Sara J. McLaughlin

“Join the Winning Team.” “Team up with Compeer and Buffalo Bills’ Bill Polian.” With invitations like these, aimed primarily at men, the Compeer Program in Rochester, New York, has taken aim at that often elusive quarry, the male volunteer. Successful male recruitment, always more difficult than attracting women to volunteer opportunities, is certain to be more challenging than ever in the ‘90s, but Compeer is ready with proven strategies designed to spark interest among men.

Compeer, Inc., a program matching adults and children receiving therapy for mental or emotional illness with trained volunteers of the same sex, has 116 programs in 36 states. The Rochester program, which has 600 matches and a waiting list of 300 clients, is the largest. Its need for volunteers, always acute, has become more urgent recently because of the dramatic increase in the number of children and adolescents being referred to the program.

Compeer staff, current volunteers,

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board members, and supporters in the community all participate in finding the right people to commit themselves to these very special one-to-one friendships in which volunteers meet weekly for a year or longer with their Compeer client-friends. Through the Compeer national newsletter and national conferences, programs around the country share recruitment ideas and strategies.

Faith in the early bird’s traditional prowess stimulated the Rochester Compeer Program’s most successful male recruiting venture last year, the “Power Breakfast.” News releases were sent to the media and over 2,000 flyers went out to health clubs, industries, churches, libraries, and services clubs inviting men to breakfast and a chance to hear about Compeer at 7:30 on a Wednesday morning at its downtown office.

Participants in the one-hour, all-male program enjoyed juice, pastry, fruit and coffee as two volunteers shared their Compeer volunteer experiences and a psychologist spoke briefly on “How Volunteering Can Enhance Your Mental and Physical Well-Being.” Afterwards, staff were available to discuss the Compeer process and volunteer opportunities with

individuals and to set up interviews with potential volunteers. Of the 18 men who attended, six were matched with clients and five more expressed interest in future involvement. This event will be repeated annually.

Lunch time offers possibilities for recruiting men, too. In planning its annual fundraising luncheon, the Rochester program looks for a compelling speaker who will bring out hundreds of people, especially businessmen. Last fall board members and staff worked hard to promote purchase of corporate tables and encourage individuals to attend the event. The luncheon honored a prominent local businessman who has been a tireless Compeer supporter and featured an address by a nationally known college basketball coach.

Over 700 people attended, more than half of them men representing their businesses and hearing the Compeer story for the first time. Never missing an opportunity to recruit, the staff put literature about the program at every place. The event not only raised a significant amount of money, it also raised community awareness of Compeer and resulted in many new volunteers, including several men. This year’s

luncheon, which will honor a woman for exceptional service to Compeer and the community, will have as the keynote speaker the general manager of the neighboring Buffalo Bills NFL team.

Friends in high places are always a boon to a volunteer organization. When that friend is a popular, highly visible sheriff, the public relations benefits are substantial. Rochester's sheriff, who is also a male Compeer volunteer and member of its advisory board, brings the need for volunteers before an especially promising group: the young, predominantly male police recruit classes. Along with the Rochester police chief, who is also male, he appeared in a training film stressing the satisfaction of being a Compeer volunteer. The two invited the young men and women joining the force to move beyond the police function of intervening with people whose troubled behavior draws attention to make an ongoing connection with one person who needs a friend. These prominent male figures speaking out on behalf of Compeer have an impact—and bring in new volunteers.

Male volunteers and matches are highlighted with special frequency in all Compeer's public relations materials. The television public service announcement in which the sheriff says, "To most of you, I'm the sheriff. To one special person, I'm just a friend," was mentioned by many new volunteers, including many men, as the message that nudged them towards Compeer. Hearing an undeniably busy man say that if he can find an hour a week to reach out, so can almost anyone else have a significant impact.

Other television and radio PSAs, posters, and newspaper publicity feature men often, too. The Binghamton, NY, Compeer Program won the award for best television spot at the 1990 Compeer National Conference for its PSA showing two men talking during a companionable, relaxed walk in a park. Another effective recent PSA shows a teenager and his young-adult Compeer friend playing basketball and then talking simply about how much each looks forward to the weekly get-together. These messages hammer home the perception of Compeer as a program in which men can make an important and tremendously satisfying contribution.

Male volunteers have stressed the importance in such publicity of avoiding language that would intimidate prospective volunteers. Too much emphasis on commitment to the relationship and on their being positive role models frightens off

many good potential Compeer friends.

Even a competing volunteer agency's press coverage on its need for male volunteers can be turned to one's own advantage. When the local paper ran a front-page story on the critical need for male volunteers in the Big Brother/Big Sister Program, a Compeer staff member quickly followed up with a moving letter to the editor. Pointing out that the situation was serious for Compeer, too, it invited men to get involved in one of these programs where they could make a real difference.

Seeking outside help at some stage can be an effective recruiting move as well. The Rochester program hired a local research firm to conduct "focus groups" for volunteers active with the program less than one year. Divided into groups of men and women, the volunteers discussed why people decide to volunteer to work with the mentally ill, what reservations they had about the program before beginning, what aspects of the program's operation attracted them, and what advertising messages would be most effective in

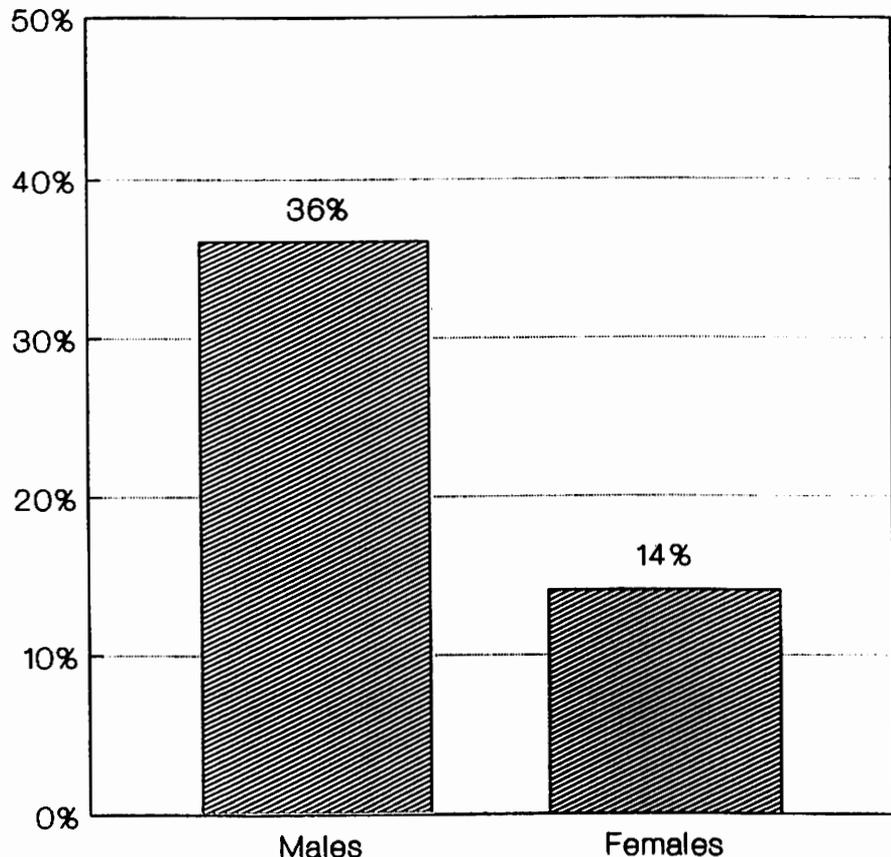
reaching new volunteers. Besides providing important feedback to the staff, these sessions also showed volunteers that their opinions were valued. The invitation to participate at a different level can help in retention of volunteers and in increasing the willingness of some to become more involved in the program.

The insights and suggestions of the focus groups were soon integrated into Compeer's new recruitment advertising campaign. The campaign stressed the flexibility of the commitment, in which the volunteer and client decide when and for what activity they want to get together for their hour or more weekly. For most volunteers, especially men, this is the program's most attractive feature.

The ads also addressed in a reassuring way the triple fears of time commitment, of mental illness and of failure, all of which, according to the focus groups, cause people to hesitate to volunteer.

Targeting subgroups is also important to the ongoing task of recruiting. In its publicity, Compeer often highlights

### Compeer Increase in Volunteers By Sex — 1987 to 1990

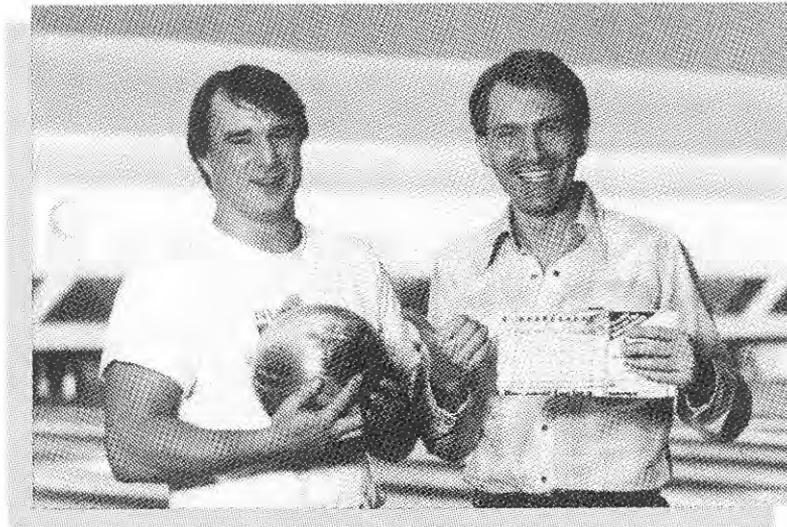


matches involving minority volunteers. Television public service announcements, posters and news stories all convey an encouraging image of minority participation, with male volunteers frequently in the spotlight.

So far this concentrated effort to recruit men has been gratifyingly successful. Between 1987 and 1990, the number of Compeer male volunteers has increased by 36 percent, compared to an increase of 14 percent among women.

The payoff for singling out men for concentrated recruitment efforts is in the many matches in which men and boys undergoing treatment for mental or emotional illness have found caring friends they can rely on. ■

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