Everyone Benefits When FAMILIES VOLUNTEER

A preview of VOLUNTEER's new workbook for involving families

IN SEPTEMBER 1979, THE W.K. Kellogg Foundation awarded a three-year grant to the Mountain States Health Corporation to explore and test the concept of family volunteering through local demonstration projects in 11 communities. The project grew from a concern that the American family is in a time of transition and crisis, when family relationships are strained and the very nature of family life is being redefined by new social values and pressures. It was based on the premise that through volunteering, families could strengthen their relationships and, at the same time, help others.

Mountain States, in collaboration with VOLUNTEER: The National Center for Citizen Involvement and the Voluntary Action Centers in the demonstration communities, sought answers to three basic questions:

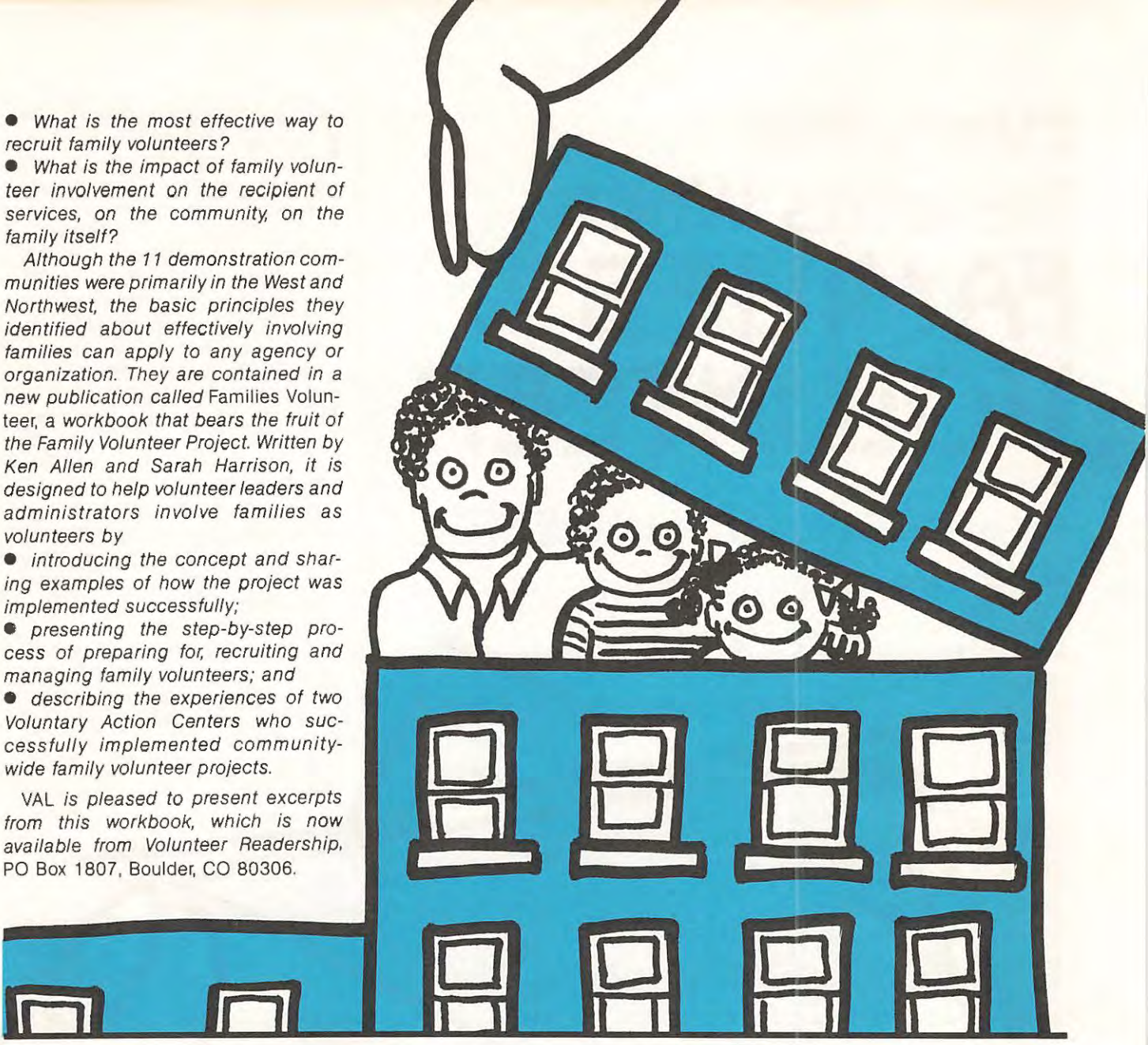
- *Are there volunteer jobs in the community that are appropriate for family members to do together, that can involve both parents and children effectively, that can take advantage of the unique character of family relationships?*

- *What is the most effective way to recruit family volunteers?*
- *What is the impact of family volunteer involvement on the recipient of services, on the community, on the family itself?*

Although the 11 demonstration communities were primarily in the West and Northwest, the basic principles they identified about effectively involving families can apply to any agency or organization. They are contained in a new publication called Families Volunteer, *a workbook that bears the fruit of the Family Volunteer Project. Written by Ken Allen and Sarah Harrison, it is designed to help volunteer leaders and administrators involve families as volunteers by*

- *introducing the concept and sharing examples of how the project was implemented successfully;*
- *presenting the step-by-step process of preparing for, recruiting and managing family volunteers; and*
- *describing the experiences of two Voluntary Action Centers who successfully implemented community-wide family volunteer projects.*

VAL *is pleased to present excerpts from this workbook, which is now available from Volunteer Readership,* PO Box 1807, Boulder, CO 80306.



WHAT IS FAMILY VOLUNTEERing? Simply put, it is the idea that family members can volunteer together in community service activities. Family volunteering as a concept assumes that volunteers will come from different generations, in combinations such as parent-child, or grandparent-parent-child, rather than just two adults. It also assumes that families will identify themselves as such—that is, the nature of the relationships among the various people is irrelevant, as long as they consider themselves a "family."

Is family volunteering a new idea? Yes and no. Certainly all of us can think of examples from our own lives of families as volunteers: working together on a community service project through a scout troop or youth club, trick-or-treating for UNICEF at Halloween, helping with a religious service, helping a neighbor or friend who is ill or has a problem.

Also, we can remember how families have volunteered together throughout American history, from the first families who settled the new country and built our communities and institutions, to the patriot families who helped secure our independence through their political activism, to the pioneer families who extended the frontier through cooperative group efforts and gave us a heritage of neighbor-helping-neighbor through barn-raisings and quilting bees.

In that sense, then, family volunteering is not "new." It has been with us for as long as people have been involved and whenever there has been an opportunity for young people and their parents to work together in a volunteer activity.

But families rarely have been viewed as potential volunteers by those in leadership roles in human service agencies, arts groups, community organizations, and other places that actively seek to involve volunteers. If young people are involved in those places as volunteers, typically it is through a separate mechanism, often a youth club or auxiliary. The involvement of families together is more accidental than intentional.

The concept of family volunteering suggests that families can be important new volunteer resources. Family volunteering has these potential benefits:

—It can increase the number of people who volunteer by adding young people, and by responding to one of the reasons put forward by many people who do not

volunteer: "I don't have time because of my family."

—In some settings, particularly where the development of a relationship is a key part of the volunteer job, the unique nature of families may be a plus.

—By involving young people in positive service activities that are visibly endorsed by parents and other adults important to them, we are building a pool of future adult volunteers.

—The experience of volunteering together may help members of families to relate more effectively to one another, enabling them to focus on a positive, shared activity that transcends their immediate family tensions.

Family volunteering, in short, is a fun way to serve the community, to be active together, and to introduce young people to the importance of volunteering. It is a way for everyone—the family members, the organization or agency, and the community—to benefit.

Giving and Getting

This sense of mutual benefit is an important characteristic of volunteering. It wasn't so long ago that people thought of volunteering as a "do good" activity, one for which the primary motivation was altruistic and "other-directed."

Now, we are more comfortable recognizing that the motivations of people who volunteer are complex, a mixture of altruism and self-interest. The 1981 Gallup Organization survey of the nature and scope of volunteering asked people why they volunteered. The answers reflected the broad continuum of "giving and getting" that constitutes volunteers' motivations. Some were at the altruistic end of the spectrum: "like doing something useful; helping others." Other answers were clearly self-interest in nature; for example, "am getting job experience" and "this work helps someone I know." Some were an intertwining of the two extremes and demonstrated that many people volunteer for what might be called "personal altruistic satisfaction." They indicated, for example, that they volunteered because they "enjoyed the work" or "for religious reasons."

Certainly, in the last few years, more attention has been given to the benefits people may get from volunteering: an opportunity to test new skills, experience that will enable them to get a paid job, support in transition from one phase of life to another, new relationships, etc. Volunteer leaders and administrators increasingly have recognized that the jobs they want volunteers to fill must offer opportunities for personal growth and benefit, as well as the chance to help others.

The "giving getting" continuum is an important part of family volunteering as well. Consider what families can "give":

—Their time, talent and energy in the same way other volunteers do;

—Their collective creativity in figuring out new ways to get the job done;

—Outreach to others in the community, particularly to young people to recruit them as volunteers and to tell them about the agency or organization in which they are volunteering;

—A demonstration of how a healthy family behaves as a model for those in crisis situations;

—Group support to families who may be facing immediate problems;

—A family environment for homeless young people, for elders seeking family interactions, for those who are far from home;

—Multiple approaches to the same problem from each member's perspective and experience, allowing the family to give "total coverage" that an individual volunteer would lack;

—Sustained enthusiasm growing from the reinforcement of working together as a family unit.

What can families "get" from volunteering? Here are a few of the benefits they may discover:

—An opportunity to rearrange hectic schedules so that they can spend more time together;

—An opportunity for young people to learn about the total community and to be exposed to experiences and people they might otherwise miss;

—"Special time" for a working parent to share with his or her children outside the home;

—A chance to achieve something tangible together as a family;

—An opportunity to interact together around a positive activity in a neutral environment;

—A new way to fulfill the interests of family members;

—A situation in which each member of the family can contribute in his or her unique way and in which that contribution will be highly valued and reinforced;

—New friends;

—A new way to have fun together;

—A chance to pass on to young people the values that parents feel are important in a way that translates those values into positive action.

Family volunteering differs in some significant ways from other forms of volunteering. Leaders and administrators will find that involving families takes time, careful attention and nurturing—both in the community as a whole and among the families who respond. But just as the families will both "give" and "get," so will the agencies and organizations in which they work benefit from their involvement and contribute to the families' experience.

Families can be an important new source of people and creative energy for those who depend on volunteers to deliver services and address problems. The promotion of family volunteering is a way for agencies and organizations to give something back to those who volunteer and to the community as a whole, as well as to contribute to the long-term development of our "volunteer community."

How Families Volunteer

Successful volunteer experiences don't "just happen." They are the result of careful planning, good job design, attentive management, and the development of a positive relationship between the volunteer and his or her supervisor. One of the most criticial elements for

successful family volunteering is the opportunity for families to benefit as well as contribute through their volunteering. Another important element is the nature of the jobs for which families are asked to volunteer.

Here are some of the characteristics of successful family volunteer jobs:

—The time commitment is flexible, often beginning with one-shot or short-term jobs that have the potential to grow into continuing activities.

—The jobs have understandable goals and logical, specific activities to be undertaken.

—They provide something relevant and of value for every member of the family to do.

—When appropriate, they take advantage of the unique nature of family relationships.

—They provide an opportunity to work with other volunteers, particularly other families.

The Time Commitment

We live in a hectic, fast-paced world. As we become more affluent and mobile, every member of the family tends to live on his or her own schedule. The image of a family gathering every night around the dinner table seems to be just that—an image, not a reality. Our perception that we don't have enough time or that we are too busy often becomes the excuse not to take on new responsibilities or activities. It is a particularly popular reason for not volunteering. Indeed, when the Gallup Organization asked people to explain why they did not volunteer when asked, over half indicated that they were too busy and didn't have enough time. Significantly, just as many teenagers as adults gave that reason.

If fitting volunteering into an individual schedule is difficult, it's that much harder when there are two, three, or four schedules of family members to be considered. Thus, an important way to enable families to volunteer, especially initially, is to offer one-time or short-term activities. Here are some examples:

—Keep Tahoe Beautiful, sponsored by the South Lake Tahoe, California Voluntary Action Center, involved families in cleaning-up their neighborhoods and vacant lots throughout the community. A local refuse company provided free pick-up, and the Chamber of Commerce donated the litter bags, making it a total community effort.

—In Pleasanton, California, the Voluntary Action Center and YMCA co-sponsored Park Work Day, a one-day effort to build nature hiking trails in local parks, to clean up existing trails and to repair other park facilities. The families involved were able to enjoy a day outdoors and later identified the task as "fun" rather than as "civic duty."

—Across the Bay from Pleasanton, in San Jose, California, over 100 families participated in the Spring Tree Planting Day sponsored by the Sempervirens Fund, a local environmental group. Supervised by the organization's staff, all of whom are trained in forestry methods, the family volunteers prepared the soil and planted the trees.

Other family volunteer assignments demand a relatively small time commitment but have the potential to grow into continuing activities. For example:

—In Salt Lake City, a family created its own musical program to entertain residents of a nearby nursing home. They enjoyed the experience so much and found the audience so receptive, that they plan to do it in other nursing homes as their schedule permits.

—"Chore banks" in many communities offer volunteers the opportunity to help elders remain independent in their own homes. From such tasks as yard work, gardening, and housecleaning can grow continuing relationships between the family and the elder that may involve the family in overall support to the elder.

—In South Lake Tahoe, families who volunteer for Tel-a-Care, a telephone reassurance project to support elders, have branched out to include home visits as well.

If there is anything more frustrating than not knowing what you are trying to accomplish, it's not having any idea what you are supposed to be doing to accomplish it. For volunteers, it is a frustration that may drive them away from the job. For family volunteers, it is a particularly critical problem:

—In most cases, it is a new experience for them to be volunteering together, and any difficulty may be magnified in their view into a reason not to continue.

—Parents must interpret for their children both the importance of the work they are undertaking and the specific responsibilities each family member will have. This is impossible if they themselves don't understand the goals and the activities.

—One of the best reinforcements and rewards for volunteers is a recognition of what they have accomplished. For many people, this must be in tangible, measurable terms. Resolving goals in advance of the work helps to set realistic expectations and provides a measure of what constitutes "a job well done."

Obviously, the short-term projects described above also have the characteristic of clear goals and specific activities: Families are asked to clean-up or repair something; they are planting a tree; they are building trails; they are mowing a yard or cleaning a house. At the end of the day, they can see what they have accomplished. Here are some other examples of family volunteer activities that share this characteristic:

—The Human Race, held annually in northern California, gives volunteers an opportunity to raise funds for local organizations by getting sponsors to support them in a "walk-a-thon." Families in Contra Costa County found the Human Race to be a way in which they could all work together toward a commonly recognized goal that was easily measured by the distance walked and the amount of support pledged.

—In San Jose, California, Martha's Kitchen serves over 500 meals during the two days it is open every week. Family members can be involved in all aspects of the program's operation from preparing and serving meals to cleaning up afterwards. By putting this activity that all families do together—preparing meals—into a new context, Martha's Kitchen builds on a common process and involves families with another part of the community.

—The Voluntary Action Center in Walnut Creek, California, recruited family volunteers to help with a fundraising jazz concert. The families assisted with pre-program publicity, worked in ticket sales booths and concession stands, ushered,

and helped with clean-up. Taking advantage of the opportunity, the VAC also used the occasion to promote the idea of family volunteering to the whole community.

INVOLVING FAMILIES AS VOLUNteers is not significantly different from involving individual volunteers. The same components of good volunteer management must be present: an understanding of your needs and of the results you expect, a sensitivity to the needs and interests of the people you hope will volunteer, a job design process that seeks to involve the volunteer, an effective recruitment program, appropriate orientation and training, continuing oversight, supervision, and troubleshooting, periodic reinforcement, and, of course, recognition.

This is not to say that families aren't "different" in some important ways. They have unique needs, often difficult logistical problems to overcome, and perhaps some resistance to volunteering that may not be present in the individual. But it is quite clear from the experiences of agencies who successfully have involved families that a good starting point is an effective ongoing volunteer program, preferably one that regularly involves both individuals and small groups. This provides the foundation from which a family volunteer program can be built, offers a proven support structure into which family volunteers can readily move, and may provide a good initial source of families from which to draw.

This is not to say that one *must* have a structured volunteer program in order to involve families. Churches, neighborhood organizations, fraternal groups and others are appropriate places for families to volunteer. But leaders in these settings will want to be sensitive to the unique potentials and needs of families who volunteer.

THE MOST OBVIOUS CHARACteristic of families is that they are composed of more than one person. If you have worked with small groups of volunteers, you will be sensitive to the ways in which they differ from individual volunteers working alone. Here are some thoughts about families as groups:

Decision-making usually takes longer for groups than it does for individuals. Thus, there may be a time lapse be-

The three profiles that begin here and accompany this article were written by James H. Shields, a freelance writer in Washington, D.C.

Although the Stephen Folands had already logged their share of community service in their Rivermore suburb near San Francisco, the whole-family concept of volunteering was something new for them. With children just now coming of age—"I've got a 'six,' a 'three,' and a 'zero,'" Foland explained—their only joint venture thus far has been an evening involved in the Pleasanton Valley Volunteer Bureau's Prison Match program, which finds overnight homes for out-of-town friends and relatives of inmates at the federal correctional facility in Pleasanton. Their guest was a teenage mother-to-be, who had traveled from Southern California to see her incarcerated mother.

Enmeshed in what Foland calls "the network," the informal group of citizens who volunteer in the Bay Area, his family got its chance with Prison Match by keeping in touch with the Pleasanton VAC. "We would just phone and they would say, 'Can this woman stay in your home?,' and we said, 'Why not?'" Foland explained.

The episode was a brief one: The Folands opened their home, taxied their visitor to and from the prison, and "got to know her a little." But he and his wife were thrilled, and thought it a likely experience to repeat, a chance for the whole family to "flex up once in a while."

Foland initially thought community service would be good for business. "To be quite candid, I hit town and I'm a lawyer," he recalled, reflecting on his mainly family practice. But his motivation has long since surpassed the thought of professional quid pro quo. Today, what he mainly wants is exposure for his children. He wants them to see more of the human experience. Rivermore is "self-contained" and affluent, "so it tends to become lily white and folks don't get a chance to see alternative lifestyles," Foland says.

Though their children are very young, the oldest child, at 6, shows signs already of seeing others' needs. "He knew the girl's "mommy was in jail and she wanted to visit, and that she was far away and wanted to stay in our house," Foland said.

The Folands are now convinced that family volunteering "is a good opportunity for the kids."

The Richard Senor family of Columbia, Missouri, had not had any volunteer experience when they undertook a volunteer project that lasted 18 months. The family got involved when the court assigned Senor to 100 hours of community service in lieu of imprisonment for a felony offense. He was referred to the Columbia Voluntary Action Center, which arranged through the county's Office of Family Services to place Senor with a nursing home patient.

Assistance focused on a 43-year-old man suffering from emphysema, chronic bronchitis and the loss of a lung. The patient was confined to an oxygen tent and officially described as an inveterate malcontent.

"His name was Cleveland Crouch," said Senor's wife, Linda, "and they called him 'Crouch the Grouch.'" Yet the Senors found only the "lovable" side of a man the staff had written off.

"You gotta give everything a chance to work out, and we just hit it right straight off," Senor said.

His wife agreed. "He was family," she said. "He loved affection, and my daughter thought he was the greatest thing that ever lived."

The Senors would stay and talk with Crouch—often all day and all night. They ran errands, fixed special meals, and brought him the supplies to fashion from foil his aluminum deer, ladybugs, geese or roses "so delicate you could blow on 'em and the petals would just move in the breeze." When Crouch was improving, the family helped him move into a new apartment, and when he was dying, they held his hand and "bawled like babies."

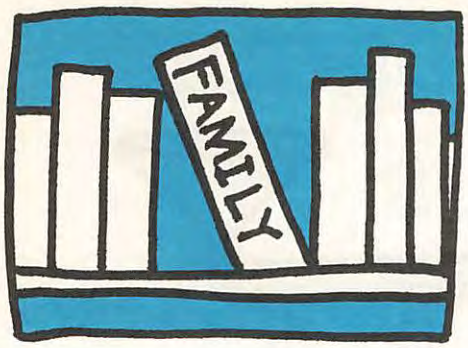
The experience "brought us closer together, it really did," Linda said, explaining how Crouch had something in common with everyone in the family. As she talked stamp collecting or her husband traded hunting and fishing tales, their 10-year-old daughter might try a hand at painting or foil art while "Cleve" molded "bucks with long antlers" for their son, nearly 16. Linda remembered, "He used to say, 'The only family I've got are you and Richard and those babies.' He always called them babies. We just got along tremendously."

tween your interview with the families and their decision to volunteer. You may want to do more follow-up than you normally would; or, you may want to try to identify any questions or problems they are having, and respond appropriately. Remember how your own family would reach a decision to volunteer, and be patient accordingly.

Similarly, families may have difficult scheduling problems. A group of adults or teens with similar common interests might be able to find meeting times acceptable to all or most of them; but in most families, the parents and children operate on separate and quite diverse schedules. However, such problems as coordinating schedules can be overcome if the family wants to volunteer. It's not a question of "finding time" (although many people want to think that it is), but rather one of determining what is most important to the family, and then building schedules around these priorities. Don't be shy about reminding your family volunteers of that.

Families may bring to the volunteer job completely unrelated internal tensions, which may spill out occasionally. Indeed, some families may hope to use their volunteering to resolve or at least escape from some of these problems. There is no "right" way for you to respond to such situations. It may be very appropriate and possible for you or your organization to respond to those problems and to offer needed support or intervention, but it also may not be appropriate, and you may be faced with the difficult decision to "fire" a volunteer.

As a manager, you may be called upon to fill the role of mediator—either among members of a family, or between the family and other volunteers or members of the staff. This is an important role because it offers another opportunity to be supportive and responsive to their needs. It is also one way you can respond to the internal tensions a family may be experiencing. To use the current vernacular, your goal is a "win win" situation—that is, it is far better to have everyone agree to a compromise, which even partially meets the needs of all the parties, than to have some people disappointed and alienated because they "lost" everything. You bring two important resources to the mediator's role: you can be a neutral, objective outside force, and you can help focus their attention on the larger goals they are trying to achieve in their volunteer work.



The Family as a Management Resource

It is easy to think of all of the ways in which working with families is more difficult than working with individuals. But there is another side to the ledger, the resources families bring to the volunteer management process. Consider these possibilities:

- In the interviewing and job design process, families can bring a variety of perspectives and different experiences to bear. Knowing each other as well as they do, members of the family will be helpful in identifying what each person can bring to the job.
- Family members can help to teach one another. Are you concerned that children won't have the skills needed to do a particular job? Perhaps the parents already have that skill and can assume responsibility for on-the-job training of the young person. There may even be opportunities for young people to turn the tables and teach their parents a new skill—witness the explosion in computer technology, a field generally much more familiar to young people than to adults.
- Family members can reinforce one another. Volunteer managers have always known that in difficult emotionally wrenching volunteer assignments, it may be far preferable to have people work in small groups so that they can support and encourage one another. Families bring this as an automatic resource.
- Families can grow together through volunteering, and family members can help one another's growth. As a manager, you may be able to stimulate this process by providing learning materials that families can study together to learn more about the area in which they are volunteering. In addition, you can provide parents with information they need to help their children most appreciate the experience and to relate it to other aspects of their lives.

Craig and Patty Alder's family of Riverton, Utah, "walked right in" to the heart of prison existence through a volunteer project that encourages families to participate. It is administered by prison authorities along with such groups as the Church of Jesus Christ, Latter Day Saints.

Out of all their volunteer activities—the family has worked with senior citizens, retarded children and the physically handicapped, often through coordination with Salt Lake City's Voluntary Action Center—the Alder's prison assignment has proved the most difficult.

"It's no joke going to prison," Patty said, "and we were all really nervous when we first went." Nevertheless, at least once a month, with half a dozen children aged 6 to 18, the Alders meet "Doug" and his family in the prison chapel to play games, have barbeques, watch Laurel & Hardy movies, celebrate birthdays, and sometimes give lessons on "patience" or "understanding."

"None of us would give up on Doug," Patti said. "We all just absolutely love him, his children and wife to pieces."

The children especially enjoy the volunteering, "and the side effect," Adler said, "is that we actually spend a lot of time together as a family."

His wife agreed. "You just don't see 17-and 18-year-olds spending nights sitting around in a prison playing with a convict's little boys," she said. "What it's teaching us is to work with different types of people and not prejudge. I think it's a good thing—something that will help the children throughout their life."

There's also the joy of cause and effect in watching Doug's progress. "He didn't realize people could live in a family and be happy time after time," Patty explained. But now he's learned ways besides violence to solve problems, he's left medium security for a leadership role in a dorm-type atmosphere, and he's taken parenting classes and become a better father. "He's just really a neat person," she exclaimed.