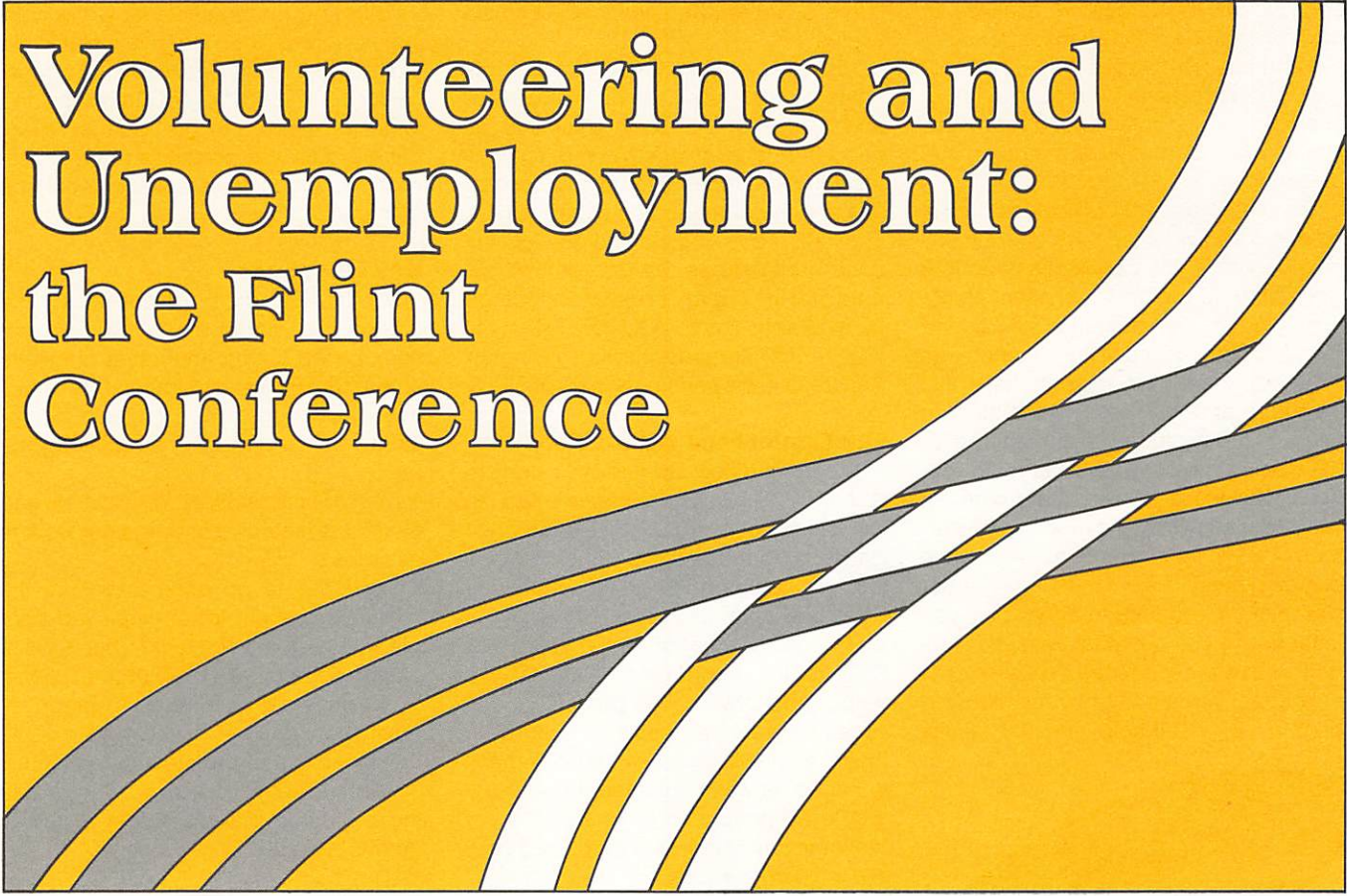



# Volunteering and Unemployment: the Flint Conference



## A Summary from the VOLUNTEER Report, "Volunteering and Unemployment"

 WEEK BEFORE THANKSGIVING 1983, as the lowest "official" figures on unemployment in a year were released by the government, 40 representatives of business, organized labor, government, nonprofit organizations, church networks, neighborhood groups and unemployed individuals gathered in Flint, Michigan. Their purpose was to discuss the human costs of unemployment and to explore how volunteering might serve as one way to lower these costs and help unemployed people meet some of their needs.

The conference, called "Volunteering and Unemployment," was the culmination of a six-month research project conducted by VOLUNTEER and funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. The project examined the problems and

effects of being unemployed and explored how volunteering by unemployed people might relate or respond to some of their needs.

Building on the findings of the project, three challenges were given to the participants of the Flint conference on November 14-16, 1983:

- To discuss whether volunteering by unemployed people can be a realistic part of efforts to help them;
- To determine what sensitivities, cautions and realities should guide the work of groups that suggest volunteering as a response;
- To strategize about what needs to be done by voluntary organizations, by business, by organized labor, by private foundations and by the government to ensure maximum benefit for unem-

ployed people who wish to volunteer.

The conference was an experiment in many ways. Nowhere before had a group of people from such diverse backgrounds and representing such a range of perspectives come together to concentrate on the "people" side of unemployment and how the human problems of the unemployed might be helped by a human response—their involvement as volunteers. Never before had a national conference to discuss the human side of unemployment been held in a community elementary school and in a city with one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. And instead of a conference format in which attendees passively listened to three days of presentations by a number of experts on the statistical, analytical and academic aspects of un-

employment, conferees were asked to draw on their own experience, perspective and backgrounds as they worked together to explore the various needs of unemployed people and how these needs might be addressed through volunteering.

The project and the conference did not presume to look at the problems experienced by all of the categories of people who make up the unemployment statistics. Indeed, the definition of "unemployed" for purposes of the research was limited to those who recently have lost their jobs and thus are "involuntarily in need." This excluded those who never have been employed (such as youth, students and those termed "hard-core" in statistical analyses), have voluntarily retired or are voluntarily unemployed while contemplating or making career changes. In addition, in advancing volunteering as a potential response, its definition was broadened to examine not only direct service to or by unemployed people, but self-help, mutual assis-

tance, advocacy and political action activities.

This special summary presents highlights of the major ideas, discussions and results of the conference and reflects the type of energy and commitment that characterized both the conferees and their three-day meeting in Flint. The full report, containing the conference proceedings, its background papers and the project's research findings, is available from VOLUNTEER, 1111 North 19th Street, Suite 500, Arlington, VA 22209. Cost per single copy is \$3.50.

### **The Conference Discussions**

The conference opened with presentations by four of its participants—Ken Allen, president of VOLUNTEER; Stephen Hatch, program analyst, Policy Studies Institute, London, England; Katherine Brian, assistant professor, University of Washington School of Social Work; and Paul Lodico, coordinator, National Unemployed Network. The presenters discussed the human costs of unemployment, outlined research regarding the linkages between volunteering and unemployed people and explored the potential involvement of unemployed people in volunteer jobs.

Following the presentations, the conferees were divided into five small working groups to consider several key questions and to identify specific issues and concerns related to the broader topic. Each group was composed of a cross-section of the groups represented at the conference.

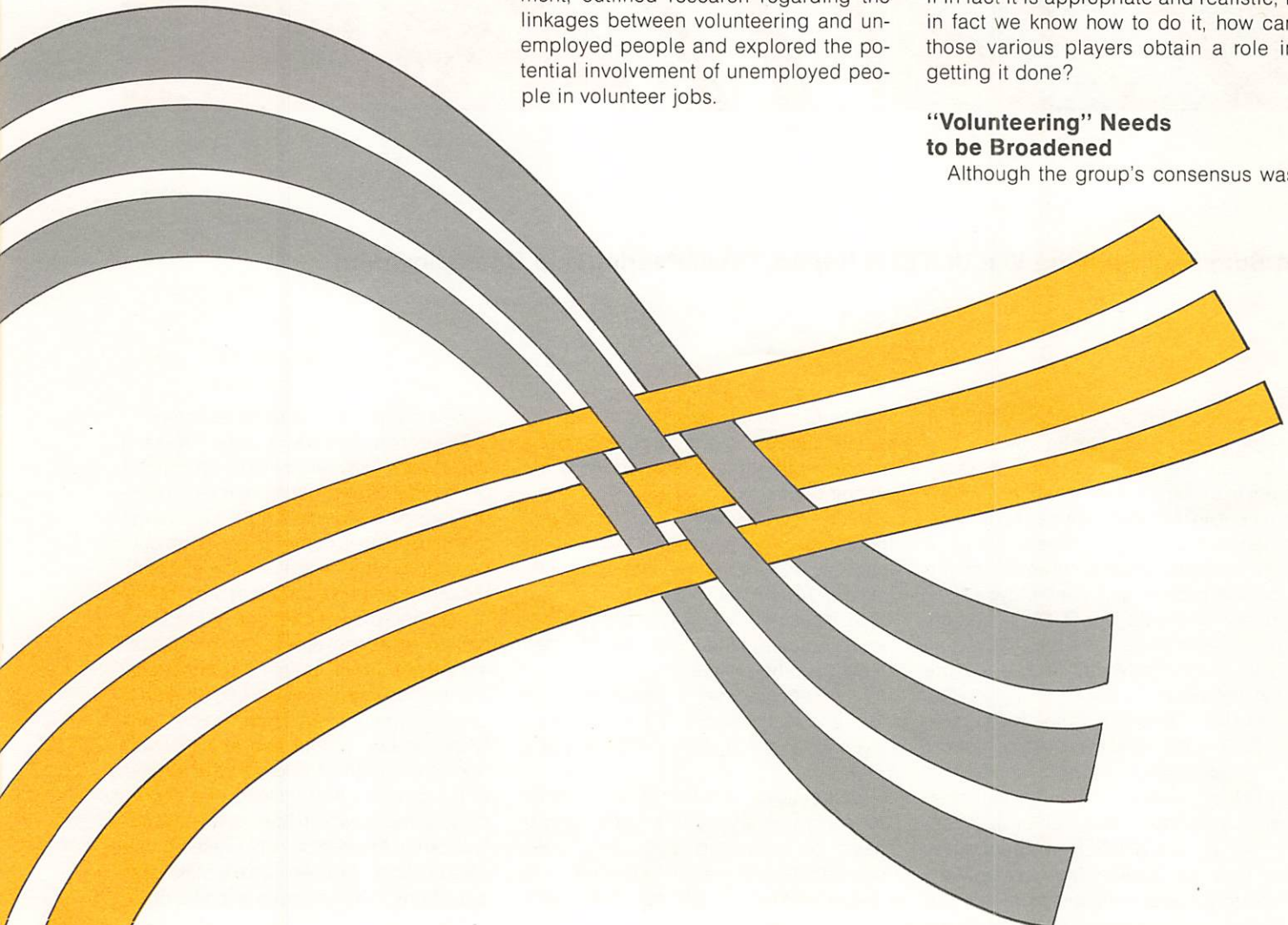
### **Key Questions**

To launch their discussions, the groups considered the following questions based on the findings and results of VOLUNTEER's research in this area:

- Is it appropriate and realistic to promote volunteering by unemployed people?
- What are the realities, sensitivities and questions that have to guide our work in this area?
- What has to be done to ensure the maximum benefit for unemployed people who wish to volunteer? That is, what can be done by voluntary organizations, by businesses, by organized labor, by private foundations, by the government? If in fact it is appropriate and realistic, if in fact we know how to do it, how can those various players obtain a role in getting it done?

### **"Volunteering" Needs to be Broadened**

Although the group's consensus was



that volunteering by unemployed people was realistic and could be an extremely appropriate activity, it became apparent from the discussions that the word "volunteering" and the stereotypes of people and activities that are attracted to it were not conducive to *attracting* unemployed people to become involved. Nor, the groups agreed, did the term and stereotypes do much to help convince unemployed people that they could use volunteering to help meet some of their needs as well as provide a real service to other unemployed people or to the broader "community."

In addition, the "standard" definition of volunteering, which primarily focuses on direct social service activities to the exclusion of self-help, mutual assistance, advocacy and political action, makes it more difficult to involve people whose main concern is preparing for a new job or seeking help with problems caused by unemployment.

Within the problem of volunteering's narrow definition is another problem regarding the types of social service jobs available to unemployed people. These jobs, the groups agreed, very often do not present a very wide range of possibilities for utilizing the skills and interests unemployed people bring to them. Nor do the volunteer jobs, by and large, assist unemployed people in developing new skills and abilities.

### **Public Policy Obstacles**

One of the most significant concerns to be raised by the conferees regarding how best to involve unemployed people was the obstacle presented by the lack of uniform interpretation regarding unemployment benefits to unemployed volunteers. Project research uncovered wide variance in the way in which state employment security regulations on "availability for paid employment" are being interpreted.

Some states are flatly denying benefits to unemployed people who are volunteering because their participation in volunteer work is seen to obstruct their ability to be available for paid employment. Within other states, the interpretation of the same regulation may be different from locality to locality and may be decided on a case-by-case basis. One of the results of the discussions was that conference participants who represented state employment security commissions expressed a willingness to work with social service agencies, organiza-

tions of unemployed people and other groups to try to clarify the regulations and their interpretation so that they would no longer be an obstacle to the involvement of unemployed people as volunteers.

Another public policy obstacle that the conferees identified was the lack of adequate income support once standard benefits had been exhausted. The United States ranks extremely low in comparison with other countries regarding the amount and length of "income sustenance" programs. Conferees suggested that increased attention to providing unemployed people with a survival income is necessary if volunteering is going to be regarded as a viable way for people to meet some of their needs.

### **Philosophical Concerns**

Participants also saw both of these obstacles as a part of a larger issue—the danger that volunteering by unemployed people would be suggested as a substitute for paid work. Not only did the conferees register their strong disagreement with this idea, but they also affirmed a goal of full employment and of using volunteering as preparation for "re-employment."

The conferees also offered suggestions for business, organized labor, government and non-profit organizations wishing to involve employed people as volunteers. These were best summarized in a report of one of the small groups, which said in part, "In communicating volunteer opportunities to unemployed people, voluntary organizations must exercise caution so that volunteer jobs are not presented as a guarantee of a full-time, paid job.

"In approaching organizations of unemployed persons, it should be recognized that their time, attention and energy will be devoted primarily to issues relating to their unemployment.

"One strategy for working with unemployed groups is to offer expertise in organizing and to assist in networking with other community resources to meet their needs."

### **Conference Outcomes**

During the final day of the conference, participants were asked to review the issues, concerns and obstacles that they had identified in their small group sessions, and to come to consensus within their groups about those which they considered most important. They were also

asked to suggest potential actions that might be taken by themselves—as participants of the conference—by VOLUNTEER and by the groups they represented.

Three sets of products resulted from their deliberations:

- Several resolutions and statements of philosophy about the relationship between volunteering and unemployment;
- Some recommendations of long-term projects designed to change the context in which volunteering as a potential response was viewed; and,
- Several short-term action steps to be taken by VOLUNTEER to expand the level of information, technical assistance and coalition-building. These steps would assist unemployed people in utilizing a new definition of volunteering to address both their individual problems as well as to attack the larger problem of advocacy for "the unemployed."

### **Resolutions**

The strongest and most unanimous resolution advanced was also the shortest and most succinct:

RESOLVED, that our purpose in providing assistance to unemployed people by involving them as volunteers is to ensure that all those who want to work can obtain gainful, paid employment.

The second resolution, which embodied the working philosophy of the conferees, called upon two organizations with influence to change present public policy to actively participate in doing so:

WHEREAS, we acknowledge that an involuntarily unemployed person who volunteers would prefer to be employed and will not use volunteering to avoid paid employment; and,

WHEREAS, we believe that volunteering as a response to help meet the needs of the unemployed should not be proposed as a substitute for paid employment; and,

WHEREAS, we reaffirm that the fundamental goal of our nation should be to provide paid jobs to everyone who seeks them,

WE, the participants of the 1983 Conference on Volunteering and Unemployment, submit the following resolution to the National Governor's Association and the International Association of Employment Security Agencies:

RESOLVED: That the National Governors Association support the concept of volunteering by requesting the gover-

nors of each state and the equivalent chief executive officers of the District of Columbia and the Trust territories to

1. strongly suggest to their Commissioners of Employment Security to take actions that would ensure that people receiving unemployment benefits will not suffer the cutback or termination of benefits because they volunteer nor be deterred in any way from volunteering by the threat of loss of benefits;
2. emphasize the "preparation for re-employment" aspect of volunteer work experience in any revision of regulations or interpretation of regulations; and,
3. clearly define the "need to remain available for paid employment" section in all regulations so as not to preclude temporary involvement in volunteer work so long as required job hunting, reporting and employment office visiting activities are carried out in accordance with the regulations of the state, district or territory in question.

A third resolution grew out of the belief, presented throughout the conference, that organizations and groups in our society did not see it as a part of their ongoing "job" to help meet the needs of unemployed people. The idea that unemployed people had somehow fallen through the cracks between overlapping circles of responsibility of organizations and groups with specific constituencies such as labor unions, employers, churches, voluntary organizations, etc., led the conferees to ask for leadership in "closing the circle":

WHEREAS, human institutions must take a pro-active stance for seeking out and involving unemployed people as a part of their mission, be it

RESOLVED, that VOLUNTEER and the Association for Volunteer Administration issue the call to all groups in our society to "close their circles" to meet the needs of the unemployed person. These groups include the following: media, government at all levels, professional associations and service clubs, health service providers, business and industry, organized labor, volunteer centers, educational institutions, private foundations, religious organizations, grassroots and traditional voluntary organizations.

### Recommendations

Although these recommendations were of a more general nature than the resolutions or action steps that were

passed, they present challenges for specific groups that should be concerned with providing services to the unemployed:

1. The idea for a national conference on unemployment should be further explored. Organized labor should take a leadership role in arranging the conference and in establishing coalitions to involve other sectors such as community organizations, voluntary agencies, service providers, unemployed people, government at all levels, private sector business and foundations.

2. Ways in which volunteer organizations and coalitions can work to facilitate the creation of new work/jobs and businesses, including cottage industries, should be explored. Such methods should include supplementing the efforts already underway by the Small Business Administration and should focus on reducing the odds of failure.

3. Mass unemployment is a collective, public issue—not just a personal problem. Therefore, assistance to unemployed people must both empower them as individuals to meet personal needs and mobilize them as a group to meet collective needs.

4. Unpaid work (volunteering) in and of itself does not necessarily help people who are involuntarily unemployed to become re-employed. The potential exists, but much needs to be done to improve the capacity of organizations that involve volunteers to deliver on this potential. Long-term structural unemployment represents a new and compelling reason for us to prepare ourselves to respond to the short- and long-term needs of the individual volunteer and not just the organization with which he/she is involved.

5. The 1980s have seen unprecedented levels of unemployment. The phenomenon of the dislocated worker—someone who has lost a good job and secure employment and has no prospect of recovering that job—is a new dimension of the unemployment problem that has made it more difficult for all unemployed people to endure the hardships. These conditions make it necessary for unemployed people to organize themselves to solve their problems collectively. Through these volunteer organizations, unemployed people can meet around their common problems, seek, discuss and advocate solutions and build a movement that will secure implementation of these solutions.

### Conclusions

In addition to the resolutions, recommendations and action steps that emerged from the conference, six major ideas about the relationship between volunteering and unemployment were reinforced throughout the project:

1. Volunteering for the unemployed person is no one type of activity—it may be direct service, political action, social advocacy, self-help—and no one of those activities is necessarily "better" than another.

2. Correspondingly, the goals that unemployed people bring to volunteering vary. These goals may include looking for help in getting a paid job, help in meeting their own economic and social needs or help in assessing, identifying and testing skills to be used in the pursuit of paid employment.

3. Volunteering should in no way interfere with unemployed people receiving their benefits.

4. One of the key elements in combating the effects of unemployment is the voluntary organization of and by unemployed people.

5. Strong coalitions among the unemployed and other sectors of the society need to be built and based on a partnership to help each gain their needs, not on just a political philosophy.

6. The primary goal of unemployed people and those working to involve and assist unemployed people must be full employment.

### Implications for the Future

The Volunteering and Unemployment project and conference provided a first opportunity for these ideas, discussions and conclusions to be offered and explored. As a result, new information was generated, new coalitions of people from diverse perspectives and experiences were formed and concrete actions to address the needs and problems of the unemployed were recommended.

However, the conference and the work emerging from it, valuable as they may be, will result in little more than a successful first step unless policy-makers of voluntary organizations, in government, business, organized labor and private foundations take up the challenges advanced in Flint. The problem remains, as Paul Lodico said in his opening presentation. It is one that is going to be with us for a long time and "... to ignore it, to neglect it, to pretend that you have all the answers is going to lead to nowhere."