RURAL VOLUNTEERING

A Kaleidoscope of Needs, Opportunities and Successes

By Ida Rush George

Rural volunteering is a kaleidoscope of creative, multi-faceted programs—each sparkling, vibrant and particularly designed to meet its community's needs. These volunteer programs are the bright, colorful spots in a grim statistical picture of poverty pockets and steadily increasing migration from rural to urban places. In the rural South, for example, there is a disproportionate number of areas with some of the very highest national poverty rates, and the economic disparity between southern rural and urban communities continues to grow.

All rural areas have different needs and different resources, and they will have to develop rural volunteer programs to meet their specific needs and their resources. They cannot duplicate any other area's program. In Alabama, volunteers from rural areas with some of the highest poverty and unemployment rates have created successful programs from economic development, prevention of substance abuse, support for and development of the arts, care and support of terminally ill patients, and job training and placement for welfare clients. These programs are all highly individualistic, but they do have certain common denominators: effective coalitions developed by local leaders, county-wide or multi-county organizations, and plans designed to meet the rural area's needs.

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Coalition Building

Coalition building always creates a strong volunteer program, for it offers additional expertise and resources or resource-raising potential; but agencies and institutions in the rural South often have jealously guarded their territories. Lacking in needed resources, they are fearful of losing what little they do have if they dare to share.

Keen competition for warm bodies and cold cash has created the most notable barrier to forming coalitions. Traditional rivalries in sports also foster competition, and the great distances between some rural communities have naturally hindered communication.

Rural communities are also noted for their skepticism of outsiders—even outsiders from areas within the same county, and this has hindered a county-wide or multi-county approach. These are serious barriers to the development of county-wide or multi-county coalitions, yet many rural volunteer organizations are today overcoming these traditional barriers.

Overcoming the Barriers

Volunteer groups that have overcome the barriers to rural coalition building in some instances have been required to do so as a requisite for funding. But in other instances, an aware community leader has recognized the need for combined efforts and set about as an individual to create an effective coalition of individuals, agencies, institutions, civic organizations and churches. Each coalition is unique, for both the needs and the partners in coalition building will vary from community to community and region to region.

The Catalyst: A Local Leader

The first prerequisite in creating an effective rural volunteer program is the emergence of a local leader. Often, an influential community leader spontaneously arises, or a local representative of a re-

gional, state or federal agency who understands the need for combined effort will serve as a catalyst during the development of the rural volunteer organization. A recognized community leader is a more effective catalyst than an outsider, for rural communities often have closed memberships. As Randy Shoults of the Alabama Council on the Arts and Humanities succinctly observes, "You gain membership in a rural community by living there, not by paying dues."

Forming the Coalition

The communities, the county or the group of counties that would have a natural interest in, need for and benefit from the volunteer program will determine the program's geographical boundaries. To form a strong coalition, the leader will invite representatives from the organizations, agencies, institutions and populations most affected by and most concerned with meeting the needs of the rural area.

As the group develops, those who are interested will become active members of the organizations, and those who are not will fade away. It will be essential to have representatives from each community within the area, and the size of the area will be determined naturally by those who express an interest in being actively involved.

Successful Rural Coalitions

When Pearl Collier, an RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program) director from Marshall County, Alabama, attended an interregional meeting in Florida, she learned that federal funds were available for substance abuse prevention programs. She wondered, "Why couldn't some small community in Alabama like Marshall County pull together a great program and benefit the people there?" She immediately set about assembling a group of community leaders who would share her willingness to attempt the project, who would have the needed expertise, and who would be willing to involve others.

First, Pearl called the sheriff; then she called Shirley White with the Marshall/Jackson Mental Health Department; and the next thing she knew she had a coalition. Her coalition core group consisted of law enforcement representatives, mental health professionals, educators and RSVP volunteers. She told them in no uncertain terms that to be successful they would have to involve the county's most influential, outgoing and dedicated people.

At this first meeting, they created a list of all the people within the county who they felt should be involved in a successful coalition to prevent substance abuse; then, they divided the list among the people present and each person took 12 names of people to invite to the next meeting. The response was overwhelming, and public awareness was so heightened that Pearl, unsure that funding would be forthcoming, met with her four coalition-building partners and determined that somehow Marshall County would meet the need—with or without federal funding.

While coalitions form quite naturally around a field of interest such as substance abuse prevention, a rural area is not limited to the formation of only one coalition. There are many possible fields of interest that could involve different populations—even within sparsely populated rural areas. For example, another Marshall County program, Target Success, involves a different group whose coalition has created a model, award-winning program for welfare reform in Alabama that emphasizes job training and job placement.

Target Success is a cooperative volunteer effort among public service agencies in Alabama that traditionally never have worked together: state departments of human resources, economic and community affairs, education, post-secondary education, and industrial relations. Their coalition also includes representatives from civic groups, local churches and interested individuals.

Wayne Sellers, Marshall County's Human Resource professional says, "The idea of taking dependent families and making them self-sufficient is something that everyone seems excited about." The feeling that "together we can make a difference" is the fuel that sustains coalitions and fortifies those who previously felt their community's needs were too great to be addressed by one individual, one group or one agency.

Another successful coalition, the Black Belt Tourism Council, is the brainchild of attorney Charles Morris. The Black Belt region of Alabama, known for its rich, black soil, was perfect for growing cotton: the main reason for its antebellum glory, controversial heritage and current predicament of high unemployment and low industrial opportunities. The idea of capitalizing on his area's great natural beauty and rich civil rights history struck him as he was driving back from a hunting trip in west Alabama, and he mentally began making plans to create a regional council to encourage tourists to spend more than a few hours in Selma and other Black Belt towns.

Morris also realized the need to form a coalition. To an initial meeting, he invited anyone connected with local historical societies, arts groups, museums and other typically tourist-oriented groups. He also emphasized the need to involve black community leaders if the region was to be successful in capitalizing on its civil rights history.

After a filtering process, seeing who wanted to be involved and who could be counted on as leaders, a coalition formed with representatives of six different cities in six different counties. This coalition has been quite successful, and Morris recommends the same type of umbrella tour group for the entire state. "Right now," he says, "the left hand often doesn't know what the right hand is doing."

Another rural Alabama coalition is the result of many porch conversations and funding provided by the Southern Arts Federation and the Alabama State Council on the Arts and Humanities. This coalition includes six rural counties in West Central Alabama that comprise one of the most depressed agricultural regions. Yet, this area also has some of Alabama's richest cultural resources, which are being nurtured and developed through the establishment of a rural center for the arts. Housed in the Coleman Center, a combined museum, arts and craft center and public library established through volunteer effort, this project represents the essential key elements needed for a successful rural arts program. Hank Willett, National Endowment for the Arts regional representative, defines these elements as:

- An institutional base,
- A multi-county organizational structure,
- Professional training,
- Local commitment,
- Development of indigenous arts resources and
- A partnership between the rural arts programs and the state arts agency.

Coalition building keeps all those concerned with the region's needs actively informed and involved, increases the abilities of everyone, uses available resources, and builds community pride and spirit. Coalition building removes the responsibility from one leader and one group to many leaders and many groups; it creates a synergistic approach to meeting community needs; it gives concerned community members an awareness of problems that they can alleviate or solve;

it opens communication among groups and individuals with common interests; and it just plain works.

Planning for Success

Planning for success is vital to all rural volunteer programs. With limited resources, rural volunteer programs cannot count on luck or the law of averages. The successful rural volunteer program will follow a carefully considered plan—whether the plan exists in a carefully worded response to grant criteria or whether the plan resides entirely in the mind of its creator, the organization's leader. Without a plan, however documented and preserved, a rural volunteer organization stands little chance of success.

Realizing that plans can exist only in the minds of the leader or the leadership group is a bit difficult for an urban, corporate mind to grasp; this is, however, often the case in the South, and the nature of the plan's storage does not negate the plan's potency—but communication of the plan and implementation of the plan are crucial to the volunteer organization's success.

In communicating and in actually working toward the achievement of goals, the leader must be very careful to inform all members of the plan, its goals (short-term and strategic) and the steps necessary to achieve the goals. Short-term, identifiable goals that the group can accomplish are absolutely necessary. The group must always be able to see that they are making progress. What the group is about at the current time and what it plans to do next week, month, year and in years to come must always remain before the organization as its Holy Grail.

The Organization's Mission and Role

The organization must first reach agreement concerning its mission or purpose; and its mission must be simply stated so that all members can remember it and tell others the reason their organization exists. In creating a formal plan, the organization would first consider the multitude of roles it could assume and choose a role suited to the needs of its beneficiaries and its resources. It could function as an enabler, a broker, an advocate or an activist; or it could combine some of the characteristics of several roles.

Enabling organizations will help members of rural communities to define their needs and organize to meet them, but they will not be part of the efforts or programs that seek to fill the needs. Brokers assume a neutral role as they help community members locate and use various resources; they merely further transactions or exchanges of services between institutions and beneficiaries of the institution's services or programs. Advocates will speak on behalf of the community or volunteer program and represent them as an attorney represents a client, and activists will engage in action of all sorts. The most successful rural volunteer coalitions will vary their roles to meet the area's needs, and they may find themselves at some time or another assuming each of the possible roles.

The Target Success coalition serves not only as enablers, brokers, advocates and activists but also as individuals who are intimately involved in the needs of the individual beneficiaries of the program. One success story involves a young lady who needed a letter of support from a potential employer before she could be accepted in a truck driver training program. After the program director presented this need, a member of the coalition notified a friend in the trucking business, who, in turn, sent a letter stating his willingness to hire her after she completed her training. As a result of the personal interest, networking and sponsorship within the coalition, this young lady successfully completed the program, was employed and is now earning more than most of the coalition members!

Organizational Structure

Just as the organization's role may change according to the need or the situation, rural volunteer organizations also have found that their organizational structure may be quite flexible and loose. In fact, organizational structure should arise from the organization's mission and plans and be no more elaborate than the plans require.

Many rural volunteer groups have no formal structure as such—no officers and no minutes. They function as consensus groups, and they find that quite satisfactory. Some groups hold regular, frequent meetings and others meet infrequently. Some multi-county organizations move their meeting places from county to county; some always meet in the same place.

Volunteers with the Hospice group in Scottsboro, Alabama, only meet quarterly for in-service training; nonetheless, their members experience feelings of unity and have a sense of belonging. Gini Stone, the Hospice director, says, "Even though they meet together infrequently, whenever they do meet, they see the need that brought them all together; and they have something in common regardless of their culture, education or standing in the community. They are a part of something that is unique and rewarding." This feeling is a sign of excellent planning and organizational development.

Opportunities

The need is great in many rural areas, and the opportunities are plentiful. No problem is insurmountable if individuals work together. Selective volunteerism can no longer provide for the great needs in many rural communities, and the time is ripe for working together. Rural volunteering today offers unlimited opportunities for creativity, rewarding experiences and unique organizations.

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