

The An Professional-Volunteer Relationship Unholy Alliance

By Tricia McClam and Frank Spicuzza

There is little doubt that, as Bob Dylan once sang, "The times they are a-changing," especially for those who offer social services. Due to major fiscal deficits and years of inflation

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and recession, state and local governments and the citizenry are being asked to provide a "safety net" to minimize the effects of federal cutbacks. Perhaps the most popular way in which social service organizations are reacting to these cutbacks is to opt for the increased utilization of volunteers.

Given the importance of volunteers in this climate of retrenchment, it is useful to examine ways of maximizing volunteer effectiveness. One aspect of the effective utilization of volunteers not often considered is the professional-volunteer relationship. This relationship is best explored by addressing the following questions: (1) What has the relationship between professionals and volunteers been historically? (2) Why has the relationship suffered? and (3) How can the relationship be improved?

The Past

Historically, the relationship between professional helpers and volunteers has been one of coexistence fraught with ambiguity, resistance, jealousy, and tension. Generally, the professional helper has been quite judgmental toward the volunteer, due to a stereotyped image—an image that is best described as a projection

of "Lady Bountiful." Conversely, volunteers often perceive professional helpers as exploitive, controlling, and authoritarian.

What has contributed to the unholy alliance between these two groups? A partial explanation revolves around issues concerning the professional helpers' concern for job security and their lack of appropriate skills to utilize volunteers. Furthermore, helping organizations have neglected to provide adequate funding and personnel to facilitate and enhance this relationship.

Turf defensiveness and lack of skills on the part of professionals have contributed to a resistive environment. This resistance may well be rooted in the training and education of the professional staff. In most cases, the educational background of these professionals has ignored the knowledge base and skill development associated with volunteerism. Indirectly, this experience—or, more accurately, this lack of experience—has resulted in diminished esteem for professional-volunteer collaboration and defensiveness concerning professional domain. In essence, many professionals do not understand volunteerism and are not equipped to work with volunteers. These gaps lead to a lack of acceptance

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and empathy toward volunteers and enhance the unsubstantiated fear that the volunteers are potential replacements for the professionals.

Administrators frequently suffer from a similar lack of knowledge concerning volunteerism. As a result, inadequate organizational support has been a policy issue for many years. An effective volunteer program is expensive and requires a financial commitment by the organization. Monies are needed for screening, staffing, office space, supplies, and recruitment. In addition, funds are necessary for the reimbursement of volunteers for their out-of-pocket expenses. When the economic commitment is ignored, volunteer programs are seen as merely a cheap adjunctive labor force to plug gaps, tangential to the organization's mission. A consequence of this separateness may be little concern for role clarity, which creates confusion about goals, conflicts concerning service delivery, and inadequate coordination. Volunteer programs in such incohesive environments are likely to fail, thus reinforcing negative stereotypes and intensifying the belief among professionals that volunteer programs are more trouble than they are worth.

Recommendations for the Future

What reforms are necessary to build a complementary relationship between the professional helper and the volunteer? After a study of the literature (see "Selected References" at the end of this article), we would like to recommend several changes which will increase the effectiveness of volunteers in service delivery: coordination of the volunteer program, role clarity, and educational reform.

Coordination of the Volunteer Program. The first step in reducing the gap between professional helpers and volunteers is to hire a coordinator of volunteers. Along with an investment of

money, effective volunteer programs require an investment of time to recruit, train, and supervise volunteers. In the past, these responsibilities have often been shouldered by professionals who have resented the added burden. A coordinator, in addition to assuming these responsibilities, also provides the vital link between the professional helper and the volunteer. To improve or strengthen this linkage, a competent coordinator draws from a knowledge and skills base which emphasizes the structural components of a volunteer program. Generally accepted components are recruitment, screening, training, implementation, supervision, and evaluation. The coordinator with this knowledge and the necessary implementation skills reduces the aforementioned resistance and facilitates the integration of volunteers into the existing system.

For the volunteers, the coordinator is the person who assures them of an explanation of the organization's purpose and procedures and of participation in appropriate pre-service and in-service training. Recognition by the coordinator of the relationship between volunteer needs and task assignments is important in initially placing the volunteer. These

same needs have additional importance in finding appropriate mechanisms to reward volunteers for their unique contributions.

For the professional helper, the establishment and maintenance of ongoing communication is a primary function of the coordinator. This communication is achieved through the involvement of the professional staff in volunteer program development and implementation as well as in staff orientation and training. Although volunteers are perceived as a supportive resource for meeting increasing human needs, their utilization necessitates a commitment of time and effort from staff members. Professional involvement in the planning of volunteer tasks and supervision invests staff in the program and enhances their understanding of volunteer worth in terms of the organization's services and client benefits. This worth is emphasized to a greater degree when professionals are trained to work with volunteers.

Role Clarity. Often resistance between two parties can be minimized when each has an adequate understanding of the other's functions and needs. For any collaborative relationship to be productive, participants must not only share common goals and values but recognize important differences as well. In terms of the relationship between the volunteer and the professional, both should realize their unique functions within the organization's structure. There are several ways to achieve this role clarity.

One method of clarification is the development of a clearly written job description. Effective job descriptions tell what has to be done, why it needs to be done, and what it takes to be able to do it.

A second means of promoting role clarity is telling the organization's personnel about the activities of volunteers. In many instances, professional helpers are unaware of who is volunteering and what they are doing within the organiza-

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tion. Communication is enhanced in a variety of ways, including an organization newsletter, presentations at staff meetings, and recognition of the accomplishments of volunteers by the organization and/or the community.

A third mechanism for achieving role clarity is to develop staff and volunteer training programs. Such programs provide volunteers and professionals with information about job activities, explore the expectations and needs of each group, and discuss the importance of collaboration in meeting the organization's mission.

Role clarity achieved through job description, information dissemination, and staff and volunteer training has positive implications for complementary relationships. With clearly differentiating parameters, both the professional and the volunteer are more apt to be confident within their domain and supportive of the other. In addition, role clarity leads to an understanding of each person's part in the overall mission of the organization. Developing alliances rather than promoting territoriality enhances service delivery, organizational image, and job satisfaction.

Educational Reform. An examination of the standards of educational programs aimed at preparing helping professionals for practice, as well as the standards of the organizations that hire them, reveals the importance of supportive resources. Numerous academic accrediting bodies are requesting curricular reform to include a greater emphasis on volunteerism. This charge from accrediting bodies has been accepted by a number of academic programs now available to train and educate volunteer leaders and professional helpers, but that number is sadly limited. It is imperative that more academic programs recognize that volunteerism is a significant component in social service organizations and develop curricula to reflect this fact.

**Educational programs can help
defuse conflicts between
professionals and volunteers.**

Clear-cut roles are crucial in reducing turf defensiveness.

Educational programs can play an important part in defusing the historical conflictive relationship between professional helpers and volunteers by providing the knowledge and skills necessary to enhance collaboration. Especially important content areas include developing job descriptions, matching volunteers to jobs commensurate with their qualifications and needs, developing a collaborative environment, adapting motivational strategies and rewards, and providing training for volunteers and staff. In addition, critical supervisory skills include providing thorough instructions, identifying clear expectations, expressing appreciation, and confronting inappropriate behavior.

Conclusion

With the current need for increased supportive resources, the effective utilization of volunteers is of such importance that Harriet Naylor in *Volunteers Today—Finding, Training, and Working With Them*, suggests that "there are very few jobs which cannot be extended, reinforced, or enriched by a volunteer partner in the work to be done." Historically, the acceptance of volunteerism as a concept has

not been an issue. Implementation, on the other hand, has caused considerable strain between volunteers and professional helpers. This article has put forth a number of ways to minimize the conflict. Specifically, combinations of effective coordination, role clarity, and educational reform are stressed as approaches to lessen resistance and increase effective utilization of volunteers. What is needed at this time is further research to support these premises.

To nonprofit organizations, volunteers can bring fresh perspectives, additional person power, various skills, encouragement, and creative ideas. To clients, volunteers can bring enthusiasm, support, companionship, and relief from professional jargon and bureaucratic red tape. But without a complementary, supportive relationship, these positive possibilities may be more rhetoric than reality. ■

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For a comprehensive list of further resources on volunteerism, along with ordering instructions, contact The Society For Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center, 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (608-274-9777).