

The Role of the Volunteer

**Fulfilling the purposes for involving volunteers
depends on finding work they are able to do**

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Why is volunteer effort important? What are the types of roles volunteers can perform? How does the volunteer's performance in certain areas compare to what the professional could do? What is generally known of opportunities available to volunteers? These are among the questions entertained by professionals who work with or arrange for the involvement of volunteers. This article puts such questions into focus.

IN getting perspective for a discussion of the volunteer's role in youth development organizations, it is useful to note that the great bulk of activities that contribute to the development of children and youth are performed by adults and youth who are not trained professionals. The initial education of children on which the schools are accustomed to build is typically a function of the home. The basic development of a sound body and good health habits is also provided in the normal home. The child's moral and religious attitudes are strongly dependent on his early experiences in the home and neighborhood. Wholesome recreation is largely begun through the play activities in home and community. The so-called normal home and community are places where parents, children, and youth live, play, and work together in ways that furnish the essential conditions for constructive development of children. These necessary tasks are performed largely by adults and youth who have not been given special professional training.

Many agencies that serve children and youth have generally been instituted because some homes and some communities are not providing this so-called normal environment in which constructive de-

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velopment takes place. Others, like the school, are established because of the need for learning things which are difficult or impossible to acquire informally, like the ability to read, skill in handling mathematical problems, an understanding of the basic principles of science, and the like. But the very large part played by nonprofessionals in youth development should be remembered when we ask ourselves how volunteers may best contribute to the work of organizations and agencies.

FIVE REASONS WHY

Before discussing the volunteer's role I should like to turn to a question: Why is volunteer effort so important in organizations devoted to youth development? Five reasons are commonly mentioned.

An environment in which children and youth develop most fully is one in which there is genuine warmth and respect. People care for each other because they are people, not because they are paid for it. There is always danger that an organization will become impersonal—the staff will operate with some efficiency, but with little personal commitment or involvement. The volunteers in an organization help to maintain the atmosphere of caring, of working and playing with others in a warm and friendly way. Hence, one reason to involve volunteers in an organization is to help maintain in it a climate of understanding.

A second reason is that we laymen get help from the experience to do a better job in our own home and community. Working with youth under professional guidance helps me to understand youth more fully and to be a better father and neighbor. Similarly, a boy or girl who serves as a volunteer gains greater understanding and appreciation of the role he can play at home, in school, and elsewhere in the community. This can be a very important value to the volunteer and in this way he contributes to society beyond the service performed in the organization.

A third reason for involving volunteers is the additional help they give to developing public understanding and support of the agency. This is accomplished largely by the enthusiasm shown by nonprofessionals who have become involved in the organization's work. The professional is expected to speak out for his organization because his job is there. Reports given by volunteers on the value of the agency and their strong endorsement are much more likely to be taken seriously.

A fourth reason for using volunteers is the shortage of well-

trained professionals. In all fields of youth development, the demand far exceeds the supply. Health agencies never find enough professional nurses and social workers to carry the load. Educational organizations, character-building agencies, recreation centers, correctional agencies, family service organizations, all the youth development organizations cannot find enough trained personnel to provide full staffs. Without the enlistment of volunteers, most organizations would either close up or reduce their volume to a small fraction of the need. Volunteers are needed to complement and supplement the professional worker's efforts.

Even when an agency is fortunate enough to have a fairly adequate complement of professionals, the addition of volunteers makes possible increased services within the limited budget. This is a fifth reason commonly given for using volunteers.

To summarize, the five reasons for involving volunteers in youth development organizations are that: (1) volunteers help to maintain a friendly climate in the agency; (2) they learn from experience in the organization ways to be better members of the family and community; (3) they help in getting public understanding and support of the work of the organization; (4) they furnish greatly needed personnel to supplement and complement the professional staff; and (5) they make it possible for the agency to increase its services in spite of a limited budget.

ROLES ARE VARIED

The purposes for involving volunteers are not likely to be fulfilled unless we can find out the kinds of work volunteers are able to do. In the experience of youth development organizations with long histories (like the YMCA) or more recent programs (like compensatory education, Head Start, Civil Rights training, and programs with emotionally disturbed children) volunteers have contributed constructively in several major kinds of roles.

One of the most natural roles for the youth or adult to take on is the normal role he would perform as a participating member of a family or neighborhood group. For example, many disadvantaged children are handicapped by lack of language experience, friendly social contacts, and experience with simple games which require some application of rules and ability to foresee the consequences of certain acts or moves in the game. In the so-called normal home, members of the family talk with children, read to them or tell them stories, play appropriate games with them, and share in discussing experiences and planning other activities. Doing these things with

children or youth who have lacked this kind of normal experience is a contribution of importance to their development. It requires no special training so can easily be undertaken by volunteers.

A second way in which volunteers are making contributions is by providing encouragement and reassurance to children and youth who are trying to learn something new or undertaking an action which seems difficult to them. Often children in families with low incomes and children whose parents view the world as dangerous and threatening are cautioned at home against positive active participation in school or other community enterprises. These children are urged again and again to be careful and to do nothing which might get them into trouble. As a consequence, many are fearful of making attempts to learn or to undertake new activities. They have little self-confidence and rarely have gained the satisfaction of succeeding in something. I have noted a number of Head Start groups in which nonprofessionals were contributing importantly to the self-confidence and emotional support of children who were being encouraged to learn. Similar observations have been made in various other programs and organizations. The warm, friendly encouragement of a volunteer youth or adult helps in many youth development programs.

A third kind of contribution is for the volunteer to serve as a model or illustration of what the child or youth is seeking to become or to learn. One of the powerful negative influences in a bad environment is the presence of persons whose character and behavior set a poor example, and the absence of many who exemplify desirable characteristics. As we grow up, we are prone to emulate those around us who seem powerful or attractive. If we have a variety of positive personalities among our acquaintances we are helped in developing positive personalities of our own. Every youth development agency needs to have persons involved in its work who represent a variety of constructive and attractive personalities. Volunteers are important in providing these models. If a boy or girl can relate himself in a friendly way to one or more of the boys and girls being served by the agency, his actions and his style will often be imitated; thus he can help to direct the young person into constructive patterns of development. Adult volunteers serve in this way, too.

A fourth kind of contribution is serving as a means of communication in both directions between professionals and the clients served by an organization. Most organizations suffer from faulty communication. The clients know too little about the purposes and programs of the agency and often have serious misconceptions of them; the professional staff has too limited an understanding of the goals, problems, activities, attitudes, and beliefs of clients. Hence,

programs often miss their mark: client needs may be neglected unconsciously and many efforts of both clients and staff are wasted because each knows too little about the other. Volunteers frequently fill an important role in increasing and improving communications.

A fifth kind of contribution is in operating, directing, or monitoring programs sufficiently structured that professional knowledge and judgment are not generally required. A number of the tutoring programs for disadvantaged youth have been well outlined and learning materials rather completely developed so that volunteer youth have been able to conduct them with some success. Some so-called teaching machines and other programmed materials have been devised for use with retarded children, disadvantaged children, and those handicapped by physical disabilities or illness. Generally, these materials can be largely administered and monitored by volunteers.

Finally, mention should be made of the long history of using volunteers for the many aspects of a total professional task that do not require specialized skill. For example, the preparation, distribution, and maintenance of equipment and materials are responsibilities frequently assumed by volunteers. Routine reporting and recording of attendance, of projects undertaken and completed, and of minor financial items (lunch money, game tickets, and the like) are commonly done by youth volunteers. They also generally relieve professionals by providing assistance to children with their clothing and wraps and toilet operations. When the details of professional jobs are listed, a considerable number are likely to be tasks which can be successfully performed by youth or adult volunteers.

There are other kinds of roles which volunteers perform but most of the responsibilities successfully assumed fall in these six types: (1) roles normally played in home and community; (2) giving encouragement and reassurance to children and youth engaged in learning new things and trying activities which seem difficult to them; (3) furnishing examples of behavior and character which can well be emulated; (4) serving as a medium for two-way communication between the agency staff and the clients; (5) operating or monitoring programs which are well structured for individual or group use; (6) performing the many duties which are commonly part of a total professional job, but which do not require specialized competence.

INFORMATION IS LACKING

In the long history and wide use of volunteers, several problems are frequently encountered that must be solved if the work is to be

effective. The first of these is in recruiting and selecting volunteers for service in a particular organization. On the part of youth and nonprofessional adults, there is a noticeable lack of information about the total range of opportunities for volunteer participation in their communities. They may know about one or two agencies but are unaware of others that might offer opportunities more in keeping with their interests and abilities. There is much more material readily available in most places about occupations than about volunteer services. Youth development organizations in each locality should prepare a comprehensive catalog of volunteer needs, listing explanations of programs, the significant features of each area of volunteer service, and qualifications required of volunteers. This should furnish a means for increasing the number of youth and adults who volunteer and thus reduce competition among agencies for volunteers known to be interested and qualified.

From the standpoint of youth organizations, the available pool of volunteers is small and restricted—the supply is limited by ethnic and racial lines, education and income levels, and by sex and age. With a small pool, the usual practice is to do little systematic selection (1) to screen out those who are clearly unfit for work with youth or (2) with those who have promise, to attempt to match interests and abilities of volunteers with the demands and opportunities of the various programs and roles. This selection process will not be a perfect one and it will not be easy; however, if it is developed as a continuing procedure so that earlier choices can be revised on the basis of the experience of the volunteer, the selection process can be greatly improved.

A second problem is providing for the initial training of the volunteer, followed by periodic or continuing opportunities to gain further competence for the tasks he undertakes. By and large, the training of volunteers is inadequate. Few programs have formulated clear-cut goals for training, and fewer of them have devised learning experiences adequate to reach the goals. Learning takes time and the learner must focus his attention on what he is attempting to learn. Orientation lectures, general reading material, descriptions, or demonstrations of the work involved in a program are too diffuse to permit the concentration of attention and the distribution of the time required to learn. What is needed is a carefully designed training program that begins with initial learning and provides opportunities for continued sequential development after mastering the most basic early steps.

A third problem is developing a series of job experiences which enable the volunteer, like the professional, to move into more de-

manding roles as he demonstrates competence in earlier roles. In terms of effective performance of the task, we recognize the need for sequential learning which carries the volunteer to higher and higher levels of performance. Looked at from the standpoint of the volunteer's interests and satisfactions, we see the need to avoid getting into a rut and the desirability of finding challenge and variety in his work. When he masters the early stages, he is likely to reach a plateau of performance, get bored, and lose interest. From the volunteer's standpoint, he should have opportunities for increased responsibility and variety. This requires some planning.

A fourth problem is providing helpful supervision and coordination of the work of volunteers. Generally, the volunteer undertakes only a part of the total professional task. The individual youth or the group with which he works is involved in an entire project or a fairly wide range of activities. In these circumstances, the volunteer's role is expected to fit in with that of others, both volunteers and professionals, in order to carry the project through or to gain the expected benefit of the range of activities undertaken. Since the number of professionals is limited, the supervisory and coordinating procedure should conserve professional time. Some supervision is needed but continuous inspection is neither feasible nor desirable. More effective and appropriate methods need to be devised.

A fifth problem is encountered in attempting to help the volunteer become a better member of his own family and neighborhood. This is the problem of transferring the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that have been learned in an organization to the somewhat different situation he encounters outside the organization. It often seems easier to help a client in an agency than to be friendly and helpful to one's brother or sister. The organization provides a structure in which the volunteer is expected to perform and is supported in performing certain roles. Sometimes in the family and neighborhood he will have to gain the opportunity to carry on these roles when neither the family nor the neighborhood has clearly defined them. He sometimes finds it difficult to do the things required to earn this opportunity. Then, too, the organization may have equipment and assistance which are not available to him outside. For these, and other reasons, many volunteers do not transfer what they learn in the agency to other situations they encounter. In such cases, an important purpose for involving volunteers is not accomplished.

A sixth problem appears to be encountered in all organizations as they mature. A particular youth development agency is established to meet a recognized need of youth. Full-time professionals

are employed to work out ways of meeting this need. Eventually, the organization develops a program which appears to be successful. Persons are trained to conduct the program. New needs develop among youth but, all too often, the agency is now devoted to the program and shows little interest in youth who do not fit into it. The organization becomes program-oriented rather than client-oriented. The new needs of youth are likely to be ignored until a new organization is established to deal with them. The problem for each youth development agency is to maintain its freshness and its concern with youth while benefiting from professional direction and the specialized competence of trained people. The volunteer, as he comes in, brings a fresh viewpoint and a warm concern for youth, but there is a tendency for him to get involved to a point that the program, rather than the youth to be served, becomes his primary interest. Maintaining this warm concern may be difficult.

4-H EXAMPLE

I have mentioned six problems in the effective involvement of volunteers, not because the problems cannot be solved, but rather to suggest the need to anticipate difficulties and to plan actions to eliminate or reduce them. Since I am not in a youth development organization, I am commenting as an outsider who has great interest in youth work but not a wealth of experience in this area. Nevertheless, I have observed a number of cases in which successful attacks have been made on these problems.

For example, the 4-H Club organization in one county devotes time each year to meetings and individual conferences with persons nominated in their communities as being interested in young people and being good examples of the ideals of the clubs. In these meetings and conferences, the importance of club work is discussed and illustrations are presented of the kinds of results clubs can produce under good leadership. Then the nominees are invited to try their hand in the work. The kinds of contributions they can make are stressed and the need for their participation emphasized. Volunteers thus recruited are involved first as assistant leaders with definite responsibilities. Their performance is observed and discussed after each meeting so they gain confidence in their ability to contribute. They are encouraged to go on. The initial assignments are worked out so that each volunteer can get the satisfaction of relating himself to youth and doing something that is helpful. With this careful planning and initial orientation, the problem of selecting and retaining good volunteers appears to have been solved.

No doubt, you are familiar with similar examples. Youth and

adults can become interested and involved as volunteers if they can get a clear sense of the importance of the work they are able to do, if they can be given confidence in their ability to perform useful functions, and if they can, in the early part of their service, obtain the satisfactions that come with working with youth and seeing constructive help given.

I have not been able to find examples of community-wide efforts that illustrate all the kinds of youth programs and the opportunities for volunteers associated with each. If such information were available it would improve the process of recruitment and selection by helping to develop a larger pool of potential volunteers and providing a wider range of choice for them. It should also lessen the competition among agencies for the services of volunteers.

In one program for emotionally disturbed children, I found a workable plan for sequential experiences that helped to maintain continued interest and involvement of volunteers. This plan listed various roles for the volunteer and arranged them in an order which the staff believed represented increasing demands for knowledge, skill, and emotional control. Volunteers were moved from one role to another—not at a uniform rate, but in terms of the evidence of increasing competence. This required a continuing selection of new volunteers to assume the simpler tasks and it demanded imagination in redesigning the jobs at the upper level to provide expanding opportunities for the senior volunteers. Otherwise they reached a plateau in two or three years.

IDEAS FROM VOLUNTEERS

Some of the new projects in compensatory education are achieving success in maintaining originality and freshness in their programs by encouraging new ideas from their volunteers, by listening carefully to the criticisms and praise of their clients, and by visiting programs in other places to get new conceptions of the task. They not only seek and encourage new ideas, but the staff consciously tries to translate these new notions into policies and practices.

For example, one of the Chicago projects which had been working entirely with disadvantaged children found out from many of the children that their mothers discouraged them from trying to learn new things. A project staff member visited the Bank Street College of Education in New York City and observed the work being done there with parents from Puerto Rico. These parents became interested in learning how to help their children in school. Although the family structure of the Puerto Ricans was much stronger and more closely knit than that of the families in the Chicago proj-

ect, the Chicago staff decided to devote part of their effort to working with the mothers of the disadvantaged children. This concern for new ideas and willingness to try to put them into practice kept the organization flexible, and the volunteers feel that they have some responsibility in helping to improve the work. They are not expected simply to fit into a permanent program.

I believe that spontaneity and freshness can be maintained. This can be done (1) through conscious attention to new ideas and (2) by encouraging clients and volunteers (as well as staff) to identify difficulties, to suggest new approaches, and to observe the work of others as one means of finding promising notions that can be translated into new policies and practices. To maintain this attitude, to develop flexibility in operations, to check complacency and self-satisfaction, and to reward originality and initiative, continuous alertness is required. If alertness can be maintained, the organization becomes an exciting and rewarding place for volunteers (and everybody else).

Too few organizations with which I am familiar carry on evaluative activities that are helpful in improving the program. Perhaps this is due to a limited notion of the nature and possibilities of program evaluation. There are, of course, exceptions. I have observed a health agency in which evaluation is used to guide efforts at improvement and to reward volunteers, as well as staff, by getting concrete evidence of the values of their work. In its venereal disease program, the planning of evaluation accompanied the planning of the project. Decisions were made regarding the youth to be reached and the goals to be attained. The emphasis was to be placed on developing understanding of the ways in which VD is transmitted, the usual effects upon those infected, and the procedures to be followed if infection is suspected. Some attention was to be given to developing appropriate attitudes and practices. The evaluation procedures were also outlined at this time. They included testing, interviewing a sample of the participants, and collecting data from the health records. In connection with the interviewing, several cases were described quite fully. These evaluation procedures have yielded information which helped in revising and improving the project. The concrete descriptions from youth of some of the constructive effects of their experience in the project were helpful to staff and volunteers in gaining a sense of real contribution which was a source of encouragement to them.

Volunteers have important roles to play, and I believe that they are being more effectively involved now than in years past.