

NOTE: Bills currently under discussion in the General Assembly on this topic are as follows:

HB 351, Dillard, et al.; HB 891, Hargrove, et al.; SB 403, Saslaw.

THE VOLUNTEER ROLE IN THE MILITARY COMMUNITY

BY Ralph Blanchard

On September 24, 1983, the President signed into Public Law a provision that permits the military services to use volunteers in support of family programs. Public Law 98-94 states that the "Secretary of a military department may accept from any person voluntary services to be provided for a museum or a family support program operated by that military department." This article highlights some of the valuable volunteer activities within the military community and discusses various aspects of this important subject.

The recent Congressional action which facilitated and enhanced the role of the volunteer in the military community has given new impetus to volunteerism within the Defense Establishment. The bill, which became law last fall, authorized the use of voluntary services for military family support programs. Its enactment, appropriately enough, came during the Year of the Volunteer which continues through April 1984.

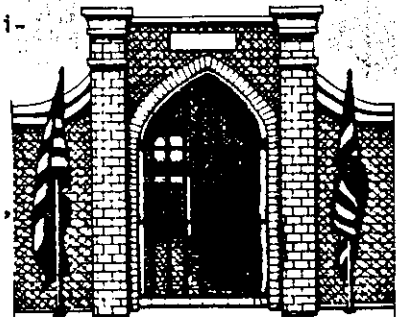
The volunteer spirit in the military is strong. A Defense official states that people in the military community volunteer "at the same level or above the general public," William B. Robertson, Assistant Director for the Office of Economic Adjustment for the Department of Defense, adds that the volunteer impact of service men and women and their family members is felt not only on the military installation but also in civilian communities where the majority of military families live. For the 1,075,000 "active duty" military families, there are only 378,000 military housing units available worldwide, which means that sixty-five percent of all military families live off military installations. Obviously, the volunteer contribution of military families has an impact on both military and civilian community life.

An Army handbook on volunteers traces the roots of military volunteerism to the early days of our nation's history. The isolation of early military installations and the separation of military personnel from civilian populations, the handbook points out, produced a high degree of self-reliance and independence within military communities, leading to a mutual concern for others and the extension of voluntary assistance among family members of the installation.

The military has come a long way since those early days, as exemplified by the many relevant and effective programs conducted for the benefit of service members and their families; and, just as the military's concern for family quality-of-life has grown, the need for volunteer services has become generally recognized and accepted.

Today, volunteer services extend the resources that are available for military personnel and family members and expand the service capability of family programs, such as those provided by family centers, hospitals, chapels, welfare and recreation centers and schools. If volunteer services within the military setting were to disappear, the quality of life within the military community would be dramatically reduced. The amount of money it would take to replace volunteer services with funded services is not known, but the figure is substantial. A volunteer coordinator in Fairfax County near Washington, D.C., for example, reports that school officials there estimate that school volunteer services in that county alone represented \$5,260,000.00 in the 1982-83 school year.

Military leaders recognize that the volunteer program is not universally understood and supported. There is still a feeling among some that volunteers are dilettantes, dabbling on the periphery of the "real" military world. There are still pockets of offices where volunteers waiting to reproduce copies of documents are "bumped" by those in uniform who have "official" papers to reproduce. Some commands still eye with suspicion the idea of volunteers driving official vehicles on official business. And in far too many offices, there is still a sense of fear in many of us who are paid staff that the volunteer may be a threat to our jobs. It is clearly time to look again at our volunteer effort from a professional and cost-effective point of view.



The enactment of the new law that authorizes the use of volunteers in museums and family support programs, moreover, provides an excellent time to shift our volunteer management to a more efficient, business-like level. The official literature related to volunteer programs in the military reiterates the importance of using volunteers as an extension of paid staff members. The individual who makes a commitment to donate his or her professional skills in support of military programs is justified in expecting to be treated like a paid staff member.