

Administrative Volunteers Are Worth Their Weight In Gold!

by Katherine H. Noyes

More than ever, volunteers are being seen as a way to provide maximum service to clients with minimum cost to the agency. However, the decision as to who will assume the role of leading these volunteers is one which ultimately affects how the volunteer program is structured and managed.

Some agencies are able to have at least one full-time salaried position of "director of volunteers." But in many other instances, the role is assigned to a staff member who already has other responsibilities and for whom the volunteer program is something appended to his or her "regular" job.

It is these "part-time" directors of volunteers who often become overwhelmed by the amount of work involved in coordinating a successful volunteer program. Volunteer management is a multi-faceted, time-consuming job, and requires that certain basic task elements be done—regardless of the amount of time available to do them. The part-time director of volunteers must find a way to reconcile the demands of the job with his or her overall work schedule and other responsibilities.

One effective way to cope with this dilemma is to form a team of people who will share the leadership role with you—a team of volunteers. After all, if you enjoy managing volunteers, why not share this challenging responsibility and get necessary help at the same time?

Recruit some "administrative volunteers" whose assignments are completely focused on aspects of volunteer program management. Having volunteers assist you directly in this way has two additional benefits: it demonstrates to the rest of staff that you, too, are willing to utilize volunteers in substantial ways; and it offers meaningful assignments to those volunteers preferring administrative rather than direct-service roles.

Do not confuse administrative volunteers with clerical workers. Administrative volunteers are actually "assistant directors of volunteers," carrying major responsibility for key aspects of program coordination.

Select administrative volunteers on the basis of their special skills and as a complement to your own strengths and weaknesses. Trained administrative volunteers should be able to substitute for you in your absence, knowing enough about the overall operation of the program to act for you. They

can also attend meetings on your behalf. Yes, it takes time to train a volunteer to be such an assistant, but the long-term pay-off is well worth the effort.

Consider the following task areas that could be delegated to an administrative volunteer. Each area could be a self-contained volunteer assignment, or one administrative volunteer could handle several tasks, depending on his or her weekly schedule with you. (As you read these suggestions, think about the kinds of skills and interests a volunteer would need to have to handle each area—you'll find that your cadre of administrative assistants will be a very diverse group of people.)

- **Orientation:** designing a standardized orientation program; scheduling sessions as needed; lining up necessary speakers; inviting new volunteers to attend; chairing sessions; conducting facility tours; assembling handout material; following up with those who do not come; conducting special, adapted orientation sessions for groups or individuals.

- **In-service training or other volunteer group meetings:** identifying needed or desired topics/speakers; scheduling training dates; inviting speakers; publicizing sessions, coordinating refreshments, room arrangements, etc.; chairing sessions; evaluating training.

- **Research:** conducting intensive studies on subjects requested by you and/or the agency; reviewing reference books and journals (this includes keeping you informed on voluntarism resources); conducting written and oral surveys; contacting outside sources of information; writing for resource materials and keeping track of responses; writing reports and analyzing data. You might even find an administrative volunteer who wants to develop and run an agency library.

- **Resource finding:** "scrounging" materials and items needed by either the volunteer program as a whole or by specific direct-service volunteers; identifying necessary items and potential donors; publicizing donation needs; contacting donors or resources; keeping records of all contacts and results; thanking resources utilized and giving them public credit; letting volunteers and salaried staff know of items available.

- **Newsletter:** acting as editor for a regularly-published volunteer newsletter or other in-house forms of written communication; soliciting articles; interviewing key

people; gathering announcement data; maintaining distribution list; supervising typing and layout; selecting art work and making design decisions.

- **Project coordination:** supervising a cluster of volunteers involved in a project not directly under the jurisdiction of a salaried staff member. Such projects may be experimental or may provide an extra service—anything that would fall to you to supervise if you did not have an administrative volunteer.

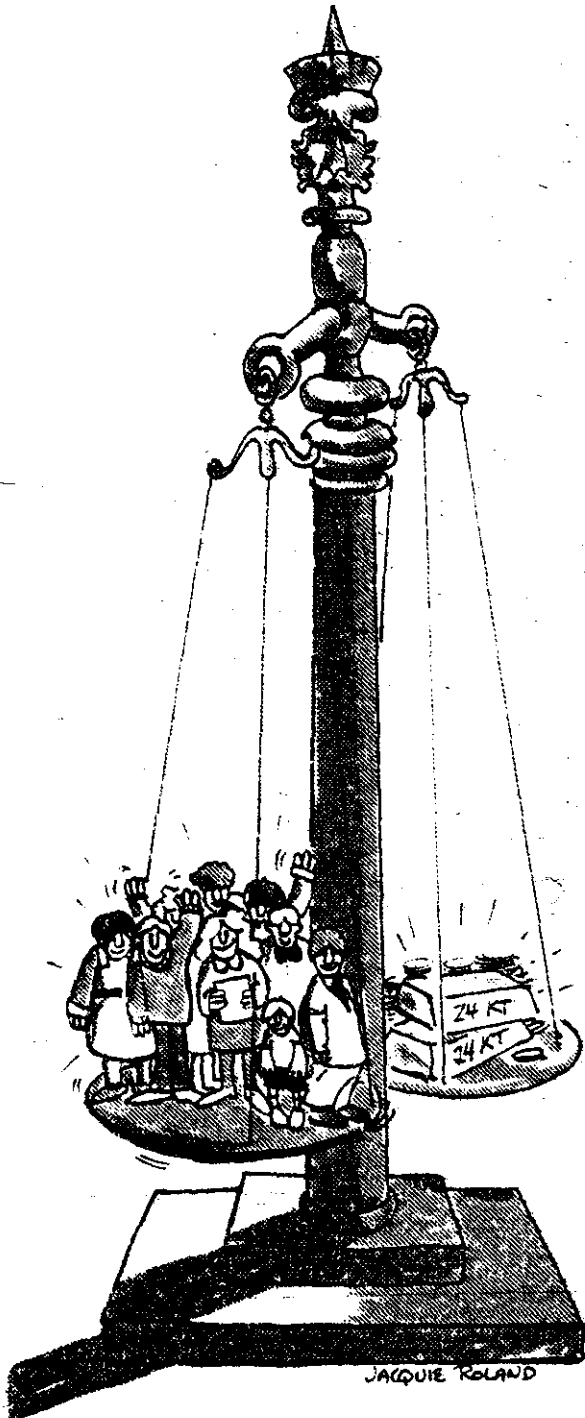
As "project coordinator," a volunteer should have the responsibility inherent in the title, including some recruiting and screening of other volunteers for the project, training and supervising project workers, keeping records on project progress, etc. In essence, the project coordinator keeps the project going, with you providing periodic support.

- **Liaisoning:** keeping in touch with volunteers and salaried staff on a periodic, informal basis to assure that everything is going smoothly; providing volunteers an extra "ear" as a sort of ombudsman service; helping volunteers who work "in the field" maintain a strong connection to the program.

- **Representing you:** being your representative at community gatherings such as tours of new community agencies, government hearings, conferences and conventions, meetings with continuous sources of volunteers (church board meetings, college field placement program meetings), etc.

My experience has been that once you have administrative volunteers on board, you'll wonder how you ever survived without them. They can make a tremendous difference in how much a volunteer program can accomplish, and relieve an overburdened coordinator. If a director of volunteers is in the position of having to provide complete leadership within a fragmented timeframe and with limited resources, all potential sources of help must be explored. From the double perspective of time management and program development, recruiting administrative volunteers to share the leadership job makes a lot of sense.

Katherine Noyes, author and consultant, is assistant director of ENERGIZE, a Philadelphia-based training and publishing firm specializing in voluntarism. This article was taken in part from No Excuses: The Team Approach to Volunteer Management by Susan J. Ellis (director of ENERGIZE) and Katherine H. Noyes. © 1981. ENERGIZE.



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