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THE UNEMPLOYED PERSON IN THE VOLUNTEER WORKFORCE

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THE UNEMPLOYED PERSON IN THE VOLUNTEER WORKFORCE
MONOGRAPH

Throughout our country communities are feeling the affects of high unemployment. More people are looking for work. Unemployment is touching upon more segments of our population, including those with previously secure jobs and careers. While all segments are affected, the highest rates of unemployment are experienced by minorities, youth, and the poorly educated.

While high unemployment adversely affects our communities, it has an even greater impact on the individuals who are caught in this situation. Unemployed individuals are at high risk. They are often powerless to provide for themselves and their families, to remain self-sufficient and to function in healthy and fulfilling ways. They are removed from the employment network, and thus have reduced access to job opportunities. Those who are underemployed may be hindered in the acquisition of full-time employment in their own field. The emotional consequences can be profoundly damaging.

It is apparent that increasing numbers of persons who volunteer are unemployed. Many unemployed volunteers look to volunteerism as a way to build skills and confidence during an often transitional phase in their lives. Frequently, individuals are involved in volunteer commitments which they made prior to becoming unemployed, in other instances they begin volunteer efforts after becoming unemployed.

There is a growing concern on the part of volunteer-involving organizations on how to assist unemployed persons through meaningful volunteer contributions as they continue to seek employment. Directors and leaders of volunteers can be instrumental in creating a supportive environment which is conducive to retaining volunteers through periods of unemployment, while helping them to prepare for, and be more likely to secure, paid employment.

The following questions are frequently asked about the relationship between voluntary organizations and unemployed persons who volunteer:

- * Are the needs of individuals who are unemployed by choice different from the needs of persons who are not unemployed by choice?

- * Why is it important to be concerned specifically with volunteers who are unemployed?
- * Is it appropriate and realistic to encourage unemployed persons to volunteer?
- * Do individuals who are seeking unemployment compensation jeopardize their benefits by volunteering?
- * How can voluntary agencies be supportive of volunteers working toward entry or re-entry into the paid work force?

When developing support systems for volunteers, realize that a significant number of persons who volunteer are unemployed by choice. These individuals may prefer to concentrate their energies on voluntary, home-making, and/or parenting activities. Other persons might have reached the time in their lives when they are ready for retirement from paid employment. Keep in mind that almost every volunteer appreciates when his/her personal choices regarding employment are respected by others. For this reason, it is necessary for supervisors and colleagues of volunteers to consider the specific situation of each volunteer -- and to respond accordingly when establishing and implementing support services.

It is worthwhile to examine the issue of volunteerism and unemployment in the context of our American tradition, as well as current trends. Both citizen involvement and the opportunity to seek paid employment are historical rights of all United States citizens. This implies that equal access to volunteer opportunities and paid employment should be assured to everyone.

Historically, when citizens are not granted an equal opportunity for employing their abilities in either a paid or voluntary position, they will certainly show a greater tendency toward decreasing self-esteem and increasing dissatisfaction.

Volunteering in carefully selected positions can be an asset to the unemployed, as well as the community. Volunteer participation helps people to remain active and involved; fosters opportunities to both develop and demonstrate marketable skills; provides a situation which is likely to have a communications network regarding job opportunities; and establishes an environment where an unemployed person can receive positive information about him/herself. These benefits assist in countering the negative feelings associated with unemployment.

Volunteer administrators should be mindful of the special needs and concerns of the unemployed volunteer. Representatives and perspectives from all sectors involved with the unemployed need to be included when planning programs and services relating to unemployed volunteers. To ensure maximum benefit of volunteer participation by the unemployed, it is important to include unemployed persons in planning for themselves. Making an attempt to defray volunteer expenses and establish other support mechanisms for unemployed volunteers requires evaluation and action wherever possible. Since some of the special needs of the unemployed can best be met by support groups of those in a similar situation, volunteer leaders might lend expertise and other services to assist in initiating, developing and/or expanding such self-help groups of the unemployed.

Even though volunteer work provides opportunities for unemployed persons to be productive, develop practical skills and establish work records -- there are no guarantees that a paid job will be the end result of volunteer experience. However, careful volunteer placements which take into consideration the needs, skills, abilities, and goals of each unemployed individual will enhance this probability. Leaders of volunteers can give support by encouraging unemployed volunteers and pointing out their skills, without raising unrealistic expectations about what the future will bring.

There are, however, many benefits that volunteer-involving organizations can offer to all volunteers, but which may have special importance to those seeking employment. These include the following:

- * Clear and specific job descriptions for volunteer positions, which are critical to providing volunteers with useful volunteer work experience as they search for employment.
- * Time sheets specifying the dates and hours volunteered and types of work performed, which are essential to verifying volunteer experience.
- * Letters of reference for volunteers, which are factual and written according to the same standards as applied to references for paid staff.
- * Opportunities for volunteers to assume more complex responsibilities as new skills develop.

- * Workshops focusing on aspects of job-seeking such as resume writing or interviewing skills; and/or other training designed to develop marketable volunteer skills. (Include qualified volunteers as presentors for these sessions.)
- * Evaluations of volunteer performance when new skills and contributions of volunteers will be highlighted and verified in writing.
- * Advocacy to encourage business to include volunteer experience on employment application forms and consider that experience in the hiring process.

Questions occasionally arise about whether or not individuals receiving unemployment compensation will jeopardize their benefits by volunteering. There have been a few instances where unemployment benefits have been denied due to recipient volunteering. According to the Minnesota Department of Economic Security, Employment Services Division, Regulation 20(c)(1), requires that benefits be denied to anyone performing full-time work. This is generally considered to be 40 hours a week or the customary work week for the occupation.

When a person is volunteering for less than full-time, decisions about unemployment compensation become an individual situation. The responsibility of the Minnesota Department of Economic Security, Employment Services Division, is to assure that anyone collecting unemployment benefits is able to, available for, and actively seeking work. To be available for work a person must be able to report to a job interview either at the request of the Employment Service Officer or by an employer directly. Thus, unemployed persons doing volunteer work must have the flexibility to report to any interview upon request, and volunteer administrators should be aware of the needed flexibility.

To be actively seeking work, a person cannot just register with the employment service and wait for a referral. Under the unemployment laws, he/she must pursue other avenues as well. The work search requirements depend on the type of work for which the person is looking. Claimants must be able to demonstrate that they have actively searched for work each week. It is suggested that unemployment claimants check with their area office on the effects of volunteer work before committing themselves to any extensive

volunteer work. In situations where previously employed persons continue with volunteer activities outside of their previous normal work hours, this should not jeopardize their benefits.

To help ensure that volunteers are not denied unemployment benefits due to volunteering:

- Inform unemployed potential volunteers that there have been (rare) instances of denial of benefits.
- Ensure that the volunteer is not expected to do volunteer work full-time.
- Provide a flexible schedule that will allow the volunteer to report to employment interviews and accept employment-related telephone calls at the volunteer site.
- Provide encouragement and support as the volunteer seeks employment.
- Document the experiences of the volunteer, so that the volunteer experience can be applied to paid employment.

Leaders of volunteers who believe that a volunteer has been unjustly denied unemployment benefits, should encourage him/her to appeal the decision. An individual applicant who has a dispute with an Unemployment Insurance (U.I.) staff person over volunteer work versus eligibility for benefits should pursue the matter with the manager of the U.I. office. If that discussion doesn't resolve the matter, the applicant should contact Walter Lundeen, Director of Central Benefits (Policy) in the U.I. Division, Department of Economic Security, 390 No. Robert St., St. Paul, MN 55101, 612/296-3644.

Voluntary agencies can provide additional support for volunteers who are working toward entry or reentry into the paid work force by being knowledgeable about and actively promoting or implementing the ideas, prepared by Job Service, which are listed on the attached documents.

To summarize, leaders of volunteers must be sensitive to and respectful of the unique needs and circumstances of each unemployed person who volunteers, and take responsibility for being informed about and sharing information which is pertinent to the needs of unemployed volunteers. When

appropriate volunteer placements are made, unemployed persons can be of great value to the volunteer organization and the community, while continuing to prepare themselves for and seek paid employment. Practical experiences, combined with realistic expectations about the probability of future employment as a direct result of a volunteer placement, will be most helpful to the unemployed. While there are not always clear cut answers to many of the questions surrounding this issue, it is encouraging to know that people in the field are concerned and are seeking answers.

Job Service Volunteer



RECOMMENDATIONS TO VOLUNTEERS WHO ARE LOOKING FOR WORK

- * Attend a job search assistance or career planning workshop or obtain some career counseling to help you set realistic occupational and career goals.
- * Register your skills and interests with the local volunteer bureau. They can help match you to an appropriate volunteer service.
- * Choose your volunteer work carefully. Make sure it fits your needs. Select a volunteer program which will document your service hours, skills and experience for potential employers.
- * Develop your own portfolio of records on the training you receive in your volunteer role, along with the hours of service, skills and accomplishments you gain through your volunteer experience. Be sure to include a written job description.
- * Utilize the volunteer experience to create a network of potential employment contacts. Those who develop a trust and appreciation for your skills and abilities will be the best advocates for your future employment.
- * Accept increased responsibilities as the trust builds in your volunteer work. Look for and ask for opportunities to learn and practice new skills.
- * Ask your supervisor for written evaluations of your volunteer service. Work together to develop new skills or to improve your current work habits or skills.
- * Prepare a resume that features the skills and experiences along with training received through your volunteer work.
- * At a job interview be sure to present your volunteer work skills and experience enthusiastically and professionally. Employers are impressed with the confidence you can share about the value of the volunteer service you have given.
- * Share a letter of reference from your volunteer service supervisor or director. The letter will validate the skills, experience and essential work habits you have demonstrated through your volunteer service.
- * When you are hired in your new job, please find time to volunteer in your spare time. Remember your community still needs you!

Job Service Volunteer



RECOMMENDATIONS TO VOLUNTEER AGENCIES WITH VOLUNTEERS WHO ARE JOB SEEKERS

- * Develop a written job description for each volunteer job in your agency. Specify the tasks and skills required to do the job and identify those skills that can be learned through the volunteer job. Be flexible in combining or negotiating those job descriptions to suit a volunteer's needs for developing a particular skill.
- * During the interview help the volunteer to understand the specific skills that can be learned or documented through the volunteer role. Set goals and objectives.
- * Develop a formalized orientation and training program for your volunteers. This can be carried out in a large group process or in a one-to-one setting. Formalized training assists the volunteer to learn those specific skills and policies which can both assist the volunteer in doing the best job for you, but also will be easily documentable for a potential employer.
- * Keep records of the dates and hours of service on each volunteer. Include the training received and new tasks which have been performed. These records can be produced to document the work experience for a potential employer.
- * Give each volunteer an individual performance review. Go over the goals and objectives that you set together and offer the kind of feedback that the volunteer can both affirm their accomplishments and take corrective action on ineffective or inappropriate behaviors.
- * Encourage volunteers to take on new or more difficult tasks and greater responsibility. New challenges keep volunteers growing and enhance their employability.
- * Assist the volunteer in making contact with potential employers. Make personal referrals and recommendations to appropriate employment opportunities. You are an essential part of the support system that can assist a volunteer in obtaining regular employment.
- * Prepare letters of recommendation for those employers the volunteer is interviewing with. Be sure to include the skills and qualities that the volunteer demonstrated in their volunteer work.
- * Thank the volunteers for their service. Wish them good luck and pat yourself on the back for helping another unemployed person find a job!

Job Service Volunteer



RECOMMENDATIONS TO EMPLOYERS WHO NEED GOOD WORKERS

- * Provide a place on your employment application form for the recording of the applicant's volunteer experience. Job satisfaction makes a good worker. Most volunteers choose volunteer work that is satisfying. Volunteers often choose their volunteer work because they are confident in the skills and abilities that are needed in their volunteer service.
- * During employment interviews, ask questions related to the applicant's community service and volunteer work. This information may prove to be vital in making a good match between your job opening and the person you are interviewing.
- * Check with the volunteer's supervisors just as you would check with any applicant's previous employer. Volunteer supervisors can tell you a great deal about the applicant's basic work habits and job skills.
- * Encourage your employees to volunteer in the community. Volunteering helps your employee to know the community and for the community to get to know your company. Consider starting an employee volunteer organization. Your local volunteer bureau can assist you with the development of such a program.
- * Recognize the volunteer efforts of your workers. Many are performing valuable services throughout the community. Consider having a recognition and awards event highlighting the volunteer efforts of your workers.
- * If you are a volunteer, pat yourself on the back for it, if not, talk with your local volunteer bureau about how you can get involved!

MINNESOTA OFFICE ON VOLUNTEER SERVICES
Department of Administration

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This report was prepared for the Volunteering and Unemployment Conference,
held in Flint, Michigan, November 14-16, 1983.
It is a "question-provoker" regarding the idea of unemployed people becoming
actively involved as volunteers.

NOTE: This is a partial listing of M.O.V.S. Resource Library materials on the subject of
unemployed persons as volunteers. Additional materials will be added to the library on
an on-going or other basis. To borrow these materials for a three week time period, write
to Minnesota Office on Volunteer Services, 500 Rice Street, St. Paul, Minnesota, 55155;
or call (612) 296-4731 (metro) or (800) 652-9747 (non-metro Minnesota).