

VOLUNTEERS IN REHABILITATION

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The White House Conference on Handicapped Individuals last May, referred to now as WHCHI, was a challenge for rehabilitation staff about volunteers. Volunteers were everywhere, escorting people, carrying messages to the rostrum, registering people, giving directions, explaining the program, generally smoothing the way. Like the preceding state conferences, what WHCHI needed didn't require high level technical expertise as much as enthusiasm, time and energy, which is precisely what volunteers offer. The WHCHI volunteers could be models to spur volunteering for rehabilitation, to facilitate the use of professional expertise, for help in mainstreaming, to extent outreach and enrich services. And the volunteers care a lot about the meaning of being handicapped and want to be accurately helpful.

Several concerns run consistently through the state conference reports:

Advocacy: Volunteers at the conference were articulate and persuasive in pleading for special needs of special people. Neither the provider of services nor the client consumer, alone or together, can mobilize public support the way a volunteer can. As a disinterested third party, volunteers have less risk involved. Many have access to powerful decision-makers. Staff as well as clients need such credible advocates for their cause! Many of the WHCHI recommendations were for

direct services, where citizens would learn first hand how important the issues are! The 1971 Goodwill/SRS study showed only 55% of community services had volunteers, but that is where clients want services, and that is where volunteers are available.

Mainstreaming: People favor integrated living and working, not being kept apart from other people! WHCHI proposed a moratorium on new institutions which would require a variety of community services and alternative living arrangements. The public, particularly contributors, foundations, and corporate citizens must recognize that disabled persons have intellectual, cultural and social as well as a vocational potential. They want to develop all their abilities productively.

Public Information: Public attitudes determine accessibility of community residences, resources and work places. Many kinds of public information campaigns use public and professional education, radio, TV and printed word. Organization recruitment and training programs should build on new awareness, and teach citizens how to take effective action in developing community support. Volunteer action means one-to-one social support, bridging people from one setting to another, sometimes using ombudsmanship and sponsorship when needed. Interpretation of modern technical services and alternative living arrangements in the community could influence public policy. And that's where volunteers want to be.

As the WHCHI participants pointed out again and again, their recommendations are unattainable without more visibility, public understanding and support. Volunteering is the most effective citizen learning method yet devised. Experiential learning is popular in both secondary and higher education: People are getting academic credit for work done as volunteers, and incidentally, credit toward work qualifications in Civil Service and private business and industries too. Agencies could have volunteers for spreading the word, as well as for service enrichment and extension. Authentic agency training for volunteers develops dedication and active citizen support for programs. With shrinking dollars and heightened expectations for services, agencies need all the advocacy they can muster! We will never get handicaps specified in civil rights legislation without more public concern!

Staff Assistance: The helping professions, such as counsellors, occupational therapists, physical therapists, recreation and social workers all could find challenging assignments for volunteers, and then become diagnosticians from whom volunteers could take on the time consuming activities, multiplying the paid staff impact a hundredfold.

For clients themselves, transitional volunteering is a step in rehabilitation, to develop confidence and skills in a less demanding setting than a paid job. The first step comes in the home agency under empathetic staff supervision where the people are familiar.

The National Center for Voluntary Action has an excellent guide for the mental health field, showing how recovering patients resume work habits and regain office and technical skills through volunteering. All kinds of volunteers have all kinds of skills and interests which can be matched to agency or client needs. The laws for vocational rehabilitation programs have not encouraged amateur citizens in direct service, although volunteers can be very helpful in career exploration as role models, or vocational skill training. Staff cannot do the job alone, faced with rising expectations and shrinking budgets. Volunteer friends stimulate effort, and they understand the job market for their occupation. They could help locate opportunities, yet rehabilitation staff still hold off volunteers. Rehabilitation was not even mentioned as a field of volunteer activity in the ACTION/Census Bureau study of American volunteering in 1974.

Leadership: The WHCHI service requests will require accelerated citizen involvement. Not only as auxiliaries or board members but trainers, recruiters, speech makers, site volunteer coordinators, community representatives and resource representatives are needed too. Volunteering has doubled in the USA since 1965. Parallel, a burgeoning new profession is carving out new roles and expanding leadership for the whole spectrum of human services. Volunteer commitment has deepened and skills improved, particularly as planners and evaluators of existing programs. Volunteers are good at designing

better service delivery patterns, and at promoting and facilitating the use of professional services, and unremitting in efforts at rehabilitation and mainstreaming.

Public Education: When volunteers tell about their agency experiences to their neighbors and church circles, they mobilize interest and tangible support. One Senior Center took on a huge mending assignment for a Half-way House, recycling bushels of clothing because of the interest of one member. Mainstreaming by public consciousness-raising means direct personal volunteer involvement with persons and families being helped. But volunteers do not stop there. Their interest in a case becomes a cause, and they grow toward leadership roles in changing public attitudes, developing understanding and support through many kinds of advocacy and public education efforts. Some people enjoy persuading legislators and public administrators to support essential services. Others concentrate on creating opportunities for living arrangements and civic participation by handicapped persons in community life. There is no end to what one can ask for when it is not for self, but for others !

Public sympathy needs turned up in each work group at the WHCHI regardless of the designated subject. Consistent with mainstreaming, is the philosophy of providing everyone with the "least restrictive environment," tailored to his needs. This ideal is inspiring to staff

and volunteers alike, for we all have a lot of practical idealism as part of inner motivation. Volunteers, too, are doers, motivated by a vision of how things ought to be. I think the concept of lessening restriction on handicapped persons is a very appealing one. It should be picked up as a theme for recruiting and training volunteers. Most people would like to think of themselves as freeing someone from unnecessary restraints, for there is a bit of a rescue fantasy in us all!

Federal Fiscal Requests: WHCHI participants also reflected a practical concern with economics. Meaningful work, to use full capacities, would require more realistic and job market-related training. Federal subsidies for education would relieve shortages in the helping professions. Student loans might enable the handicapped individuals themselves to become practioners, in services they know so well from their own experience. Federal subsidies were also suggested for industry, to encourage hiring, to eliminate architectural and transportation barriers and to underwrite costs for prosthetic and other aids. Supporting universal TV interpretation for deaf persons was suggested, and making a sign language a universal curriculum requirement, (we are all likely to meet deaf persons, though not all of us need a foreign language!). Braille belongs on street signs, elevators and building directories. Most about money was the universal plea for program support and continuity. Reminders of cost effectiveness to tax payers were cited

as societal and independent living long range implications.

Education Implications: Professional competence in helping staff was an uppermost concern. Would certification and continuing education insure use of new technologies? Staff education received more emphasis than education for the disabled themselves! With access to the mainstream, individual special education provisions will be less necessary, and less attractive, since they are divisive rather than integrative! Real mainstreaming will depend on important learning by other people: general education should include sign language as well as foreign tongues; instruction by persons with a disability about that disability should be available in public schools to break down stereotypes, myths and misunderstandings. The need to be understood and accepted as a unique individual means the public must be sensitized to special needs of each handicapped person, and everyone educated about preventive measures.

Interception in time to prevent chronicity or aggravation of disabling conditions requires information to families about how to help, to firemen, policemen, train conductors, waitresses--helpers who meet the public and need to understand emergency needs. People related to or working with disabled persons need to know necessary procedures and considerations, available resources and support services. The WHCHI reports cited the educator, builder, housing manager, policeman,

librarian, architect, recreation director and other community figures who need not only to understand the disabled and their special concerns, but to apply that understanding to the situations in which they work.

Research must be disseminated and applied by each discipline. The line between education and information sharing is fuzzy in the recommendations. More elementary levels of dissemination can be reinforced or extended by volunteers in supportive roles such as telephone information networks, helping with coping skills, public speaking, arranging the logistics and amenities for meetings. With training and experience, some volunteers handle hotlines and mail inquiries, working with experts. In short, volunteers are doing more things which will free the paid staff to do the other things which only they can do.

Clearinghouses and information systems are requested at national, regional and local levels. Local volunteers could play enabling roles at each level, distributing literature, updating libraries, follow-up responses to inquiries, validating current information.

Media overdramatization of handicaps is an irritant. Telethons and public service announcements used for fundraising as well as regular programming could be used for public education by volunteer groups. TV could depict special needs but also stress the normal wants and

characteristics of persons in family settings, instead of avoiding or overdramatizing. Voluntary groups could influence media advertizers to realize that a matter-of-fact acceptance of limitations, demythologizing, would improve their own images as sponsors. Public (voluntary) broadcasting is likely to be even more responsive for other reasons: volunteers determine their policies.

Interest seemed high in genetic research and other preventive aspects, such as immunizations, nutrition, hygiene, parenting courses, marriage and child guidance counselling. All of these could be transmitted through voluntary membership organization programs, and some have been. Local Women's Clubs, PTAs and United Cerebral Palsy chapters all initiated immunization programs through their national headquarters. The degree to which autonomous local units pick up these causes has yet to be seen. Action against causative factors has great appeal. UCP halved the incidence of cerebral palsy through public education programs encouraging pre-natal care and counselling. The American Lung Association transformed former envelope stuffers into public health educators and activists against smoking.

Research was requested to find out how to develop positive concern out of the naturally curious attitudes of children toward the disabled. Integration of handicapped youngsters into natural membership groupings of children was requested and is encouraged by Scouts, Girls' and Boys'

Clubs and Y's. Many recreation programs without continuing membership relationships tend to segregate disabled persons for special attention to special needs, such as water safety where volunteers serve on one-to-one with people learning to swim. The Red Cross has an excellent manual called Adapted Aquatics, on swimming for persons with physical or mental impairments. The best way to dispel myths is to start with early childhood education, and provide interaction opportunities from the beginning of schooling process. Relationships evolving in scout troops or recreation programs break down stereotypes and teach consideration of special needs. Adapted Aquatics has an excellent analysis of characteristics and needs caused by impairments and disorders for leaders of such groups.

We know from many reports about availability of services that lack of transportation is a universal problem, and one about which volunteers are being progressively discouraged by increasing costs of fuel and insurance. Federal subsidies for transportation in several forms were suggested, including coordinating the use of mass vehicles by many organizations instead of duplicating routes for separate agencies. HEW is funding experimental coordination projects in Arkansas, Florida and New York from which new patterns should emerge.

The presence of volunteers in some services is taken for granted, but only four unrelated recommendations were found in the WHCHI workbooks:

1. "For work with the handicapped and their families."
2. Train handicapped persons as counsellors for others.
3. Tax incentives for employers and volunteers who serve handicapped persons.
4. Various professions should volunteer for work with the handicapped.

Ignoring the potential now, with the growing demand for the huge job to be done, is to continue serving far fewer persons and impacting much less of the public than could be done with volunteers.

Another serious concern of the delegates was ensuring enforcement of legislation, and federal regulations. The "watchdog" function, traditionally a voluntary responsibility, becomes more complex all the time. Volunteer "program watchers" turn into advocates, with experience. Affirmative Action, the 504 regulations, the Rehabilitation Services Act may take years to implement without continuous attention. A Handicapped Lobby was suggested to get better legislation to protect the rights of the disabled persons, parallel to the Civil Rights Act and the Bill of Rights in the Developmentally Disabled Act. Consumers are volunteering for all sorts of Policy Review Boards to authenticate the situations they wish to correct. They exert powerful impact. Law students are likely resource prospect for other volunteers with expertise who want experience and visibility through pro bono publica work.

Volunteers can enrich programs with resources for cultural activities which never could get budget approval these days: escorting persons to concerts, plays, museums; pressing for accessibility standards for concert halls and theatres; urging subtitling so the deaf can enjoy television and motion pictures. Volunteers with aesthetic enthusiasms always like to enlist others for their favorites. Many artists contribute their talents for art therapy or music appreciation in long term care homes and hospitals. For too long we have ignored the cultural and aesthetic needs of disabled or aged persons. Accessibility is one aspect, but better outreach is also to be encouraged in all the arts. The delegates to WHCHI recognized these aesthetic needs which are often overlooked when more basic needs remain unserved, and asked that they be considered, too.

The new Rehabilitation Services Administration should help with the many concerns expressed about the lack of coordination reflected in the state reports since seven separate agencies are brought together in the reorganization of HEW's Human Development Services. The voluntary sector reflects the trend to join forces, too, to share resources and cooperate on special projects nationally and in local communities, partly for economic reasons, but also for improving services. There are several volunteer associations concerned about disabilities, made up of advocates who are parents or consumers and providers of services. They all need powerful community leaders who can mobilize

human and fiscal resources particularly for developing community supportive and treatment services, and less restrictive environments in small living units which encourage human development to its highest possible achievement. Persons grouped with complementary disabilities can manage very well together, if the services which they all need can work out their operational collaboration patterns. Local volunteer referral services such as Voluntary Action Centers enable volunteers to provide linkages and coordinate services.

The concept of Equality of Opportunity includes geographic justice: opportunity for services whether one lives in rural or urban settings. Mobility to highly technical services can mean bringing moveable services to persons where they are. Volunteers must be involved as a resource if the general public is to realize their importance and give priority to these needs. The publics who most need to learn about such needs will learn best about them from working with the disabled persons themselves. Volunteers become the enablers for those persons and for the technical and professional staff, of whom there will never be enough. Handicapped individuals have special qualifications of personal experience for authenticity with others when volunteering. Other volunteers have authenticity derived from freedom from job or service jeopardy, and thus help us all toward Human Rights for Handicapped Individuals, the highest expression of our civilization.