

## Feature

# Trends in volunteerism

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### The author

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### Abstract

Discusses four national trends affecting volunteerism: service learning, family volunteering, influence of corporations, and welfare reform. Discusses the impact of these trends on volunteer programs within libraries. Offers examples of how library staff can utilize the skills of volunteers who are allied with these trends in order to provide high levels of quality service to library patrons.

Many national issues affect libraries. Consider just four: Bill Gates and Microsoft's infusion of funds to assist in our technological advancement, the passing of the Communications Decency Act which attempts to dictate intellectual freedom, literacy rates, and demographic shifts. All these and others impact on how we operate on a daily basis.

Likewise several trends in volunteerism also affect libraries. This article explores four especially important ones: service learning, family volunteering, influence of corporations, and welfare reform. We will examine these four trends and discover ways to tap into the wealth of volunteer resources available to libraries as a result of these unique sources.

Why are volunteers important to the financial management of libraries? The actual work which they accomplish is one obvious benefit of utilizing volunteers in our libraries. However, the financial impact cannot be overlooked. According to the Independent Sector's 1996 report, "Giving and volunteering in the United States," the value of volunteer time is estimated to be worth \$12.84 an hour. Additionally, though, volunteers prove to be a great source for monetary donations as well. The survey reported that when respondents were asked why they made financial contributions to an organization, 61 percent answered "because they volunteered at that organization" (Independent Sector, 1996).

The added value of volunteers to our libraries is long-standing and brings even greater import to look these trends which impact on our volunteering and in turn the fiscal health of our libraries.

### Service learning

Service learning is not new. John Dewey believed that actions directed toward the welfare of others stimulate academic and social development. In the 1930s with his "Project method," William Kirkpatrick argued that learning should take place in a setting outside of school and involve efforts to meet real community needs. The community service spirit may have diminished during the 1980s "Me Generation," but in the 1990s, a resurgence of community service and especially community service tied to the existing school curricula is on the rise.

Service learning has many faces. It may be several hours of volunteer service for a student instead of her final exam in a high school social studies class; 100 hours of service spread over a student's high school career as a requirement of graduation; a component of an outcome-based curriculum in an elementary class; or a practicum in college. The key common denominator for all of these is a practical learning experience which holds a direct relation to a student's education.

Leaders in the field of volunteer administration see the importance of service learning. Susan Ellis, President of Energize, Inc., an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism, recognizes service learning as a major influence. Ellis believes, "Because educators themselves have seized on 'community service' as a way to produce 'school reform', curriculum-based service programs and even mandated hours of service as a requirement for graduation are proliferating. Regardless of the debate about 'involuntary volunteering', service learning is introducing many young people to a wide range of community agencies. And all this has the unexpected – and potentially very long-term – benefit of introducing boys to direct service work in fields heretofore considered female service arenas" (Ellis, 1996). Service learning has a long-range impact as well as local community influences.

The St Paul Public Library and St Paul school district have formed a successful partnership with Library youth volunteer corps. Students receive credit for volunteer service at the library. A key component is the Student Mentor Program. Students are extensively trained in the Youth Services Department assisting peers with CD-ROM products, the on-line catalog and other technology. They also introduce peers to basic library skills of finding materials. Wendy Neurer, the St Paul Library's Volunteer Coordinator, believes the cultural diversity (Asian, Hispanic and African American) reflected in the students adds strength to this program. Student mentors are able to act as translators in languages unfamiliar to library staff. The end result is access to information and empowerment of students through knowledge and frees staff to perform work they were trained to do.

As with any partnership, collaboration is important. Meetings between teachers and

school officials to understand both the school and library's needs are crucial for success. Schools will be hesitant to have students participate if there is little meaning to the work. Likewise, library staff may be uncertain to the value of the contributions of students. Working for a win-win situation is key.

Other opportunities for service learning in libraries are:

- English or journalism students writing library newsletters, and perhaps even interviewing patrons regarding library services.
- Enhancing an outreach services program with students who gather oral histories of nursing home residents and publish booklets to distribute.
- Students organizing book discussion groups to encourage reading and gain insight into new releases or classics.

The creative utilization of young adults in learning service can only strengthen library service and community relations. By involving young adults in many levels of service, their commitment to their local libraries will grow. The library will be viewed by the community, not only as a source for materials, but also a place of practical service learning.

### Family volunteering

Family is one of the institutions that has always been a cornerstone of our society. What has changed is how "family" is defined. Libraries now need to plan on serving all kinds of families: blended families, one-parent families, grandparents rearing grandchildren, foster families, childless families and older husbands and wives who are alone after seeing their own families leave home. In addition to these changes in family, life has become more and more busy. These factors have influenced the concept of "family volunteering" in volunteerism.

Now more than ever families wish to spend meaningful time together as well as develop solid values. Many are turning to volunteering as a family unit to accomplish these goals.

The Points of Light Foundation (POLF), established in 1990 by President George Bush, is an independent nonpartisan organization dedicated to motivating individuals and groups to community service for the betterment of the

USA. So important is family volunteering, the Points of Light Foundation created "Family Matters," a division dedicated to promoting family volunteering nationally.

POLF has developed a complete planning program to assist any organization to implement a family volunteering component into its framework. Complete with workbook, video and worksheets, "Family Matters: putting the pieces together" is designed to ensure success for both the organization and the family. Using these materials as a guide, any library can easily incorporate a viable family volunteering component into its volunteer program.

The Allen County Public Library utilizes the strength of families in its Home Delivery Program. It uses volunteers to deliver materials to patrons who are physically unable to visit the library. This is an ideal position for a family unit. Togetherness is combined with a worthwhile service. Families are spending time together, learning the important value of helping others and are providing crucial assistance to patrons.

Other ways to use family volunteering in the library include booksales, adopt-a-shelf programs, storytime and other children's events, and advisory councils. Families can volunteer in libraries on a regular basis or for one time events.

The Independent Sector's study further revealed that 65 percent of adults responding said that they also volunteered as children (Independent Sector, 1996). Young children who have an attachment to their libraries through service, will grow to become adults who strongly support their local libraries. Not only does family volunteering strengthen the family unit, and in turn the local community, it ensures a love for the library that will be passed on from generation to generation.

### **Corporate influence**

Corporate influence on volunteerism is twofold. First, there is downsizing, which places many talented individuals out of paid employment. Second, there is the rise in corporations' view of their social responsibility to communities. Both of these trends work together to create a pool of skilled individuals to assist our libraries.

Jeremy Rifkin, in his book, *The End of Work*, looks to the "third sector," or the volunteer sector, to offer "great potential as a source of work and livelihood for the millions who cannot find employment in the traditional economic system" (Rifkin, 1995). *Fortune* magazine tells of the "big pay off from public service" which benefits employees and corporations (Loeb, 1996). *Black Enterprise*, *Personnel Journal*, *Association Management* and other publications have all highlighted volunteerism and its growing influence in the corporate setting (Bakersville, 1993; Carr, 1995; Caudron, 1994).

Many companies offer employees paid time-off to volunteer within the community. To work collaboratively, numerous corporations have formal corporate volunteer programs with a director who coordinates the efforts of employees and the needs of the community. The Points of Light Foundation and the Conference Board in New York City revealed that in a recent survey of 454 US corporations, 92 percent encourage volunteer involvement of employees (Points of Light Foundation, 1996).

We often view a position on the board of directors as the only way to capitalize on the talents of corporate volunteers. Contributions from these highly-skilled, motivated individuals can be a great asset in other areas of the library as well. Examples include: a public relations official implementing a marketing plan for your library; a graphic artist designing brochures, in-house forms, book bags, or a new library card; or a human resource development coordinator assisting in implementing a training program for your staff.

These individuals will not be content with gluing pockets on books. They are highly skilled, highly motivated volunteers who have the potential to take on projects that a library has a need for, yet lacks the funds or expertise to carry them to completion. Tapping into the talents of corporate has the possibilities of greatly enhancing the services of any library.

### **Welfare reform**

Many states have been working hard to make positive changes in welfare. When President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (more commonly known as the Welfare Reform

Bill), the impact of changing the 50 year old system took on a nationwide perspective affecting every state and local community.

One goal of welfare reform is getting recipients off the welfare rolls and into employment. A component of this "welfare to work" concept will be community service. The Indiana Association of Volunteer Centers (IAVC) is an organization which links volunteer centers throughout the state of Indiana. Volunteer centers throughout the country are likely avenues to place welfare to work participants. The Indiana organization has been working with state officials in hope for a smooth transition. Judi Lee, chairperson of IAVC, reports that preliminary discussions of welfare reform in the state estimate that requirements may range from 20 to 40 hours of community service per week per participant.

This influx of individuals into the volunteer ranks has the potential to impact critically on how libraries operate their volunteer programs. And, because libraries are *public* institutions, when community service becomes a component of welfare to work, there will be a high expectation that libraries will place participants in their volunteer programs.

Motivation of participants is a factor. Some volunteer service managers, currently participating in welfare reform programs at the local level, report how challenging it is to involve participants in their volunteer ranks. The goal of this type of community service is for participants to gain real work experience that will prepare them for employment. So meaningful positions must be developed. The need for cooperation and strong communication between the library and public assistance personnel is exceptionally important for success.

Stride is a welfare reform initiative in Minnesota, and the St Paul Public Library places participants into its volunteer program. Wendy Neurer has 20 volunteers each assisting 16-20 hours a week, in St Paul's system working in clerical, maintenance and children's enrichment programming. Immigrants involved in the program assist staff with language translations needs. In turn, these volunteers gain confidence with the public, improve their interviewing skills and further prepare themselves for the workplace.

Neurer believes that positive results come about when there is open communication and

cooperation between herself, the library staff, the case workers, and the participants. Because of training and volunteer experience, participants depart the library with marketable skills that allow them to earn a living wage.

Many customary library volunteer positions are appropriate for individuals participating in welfare reform endeavors. Clerical and computer-oriented positions, children's programming, grounds-keeping, maintenance, tour guides, booksales, and reception are just a few areas in which individuals in welfare reform programs may be placed.

Libraries must usually reach out to recruit volunteers. Since, in many cases, community service will be mandated, individuals will be coming to the library. This new, ready-made volunteer source will be welcomed by libraries who are always in need of volunteers and for those who would like to increase service to patrons through the expanded services of volunteers.

## Conclusion

National issues will always impact on our libraries. Service learning, family volunteering, influence of corporations, and welfare reform are impacting on our library volunteer programs. Managers of volunteers or staff who have volunteer services as function of their job responsibility have a momentous opportunity to tap into this rich source of support. It is important to keep the needs of the patrons as the ultimate priority in developing any program or service. This holds true for volunteer's services, too. Regardless of how that individual comes to your program, the key is the right person for the right job and empowering that person to productive use of his time, skills and gifts and to augment staff in providing the highest level of quality service to library patrons. These trends in volunteerism have the potential to allow staff to dream big in the delivery of library services.

## References and further reading

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### Resources for further information

- Energize, 5450 Wissahickon Ave, Philadelphia, PA 19144, 800-395-9800.
- HandsNet: Welfare Reform Watch (Website) URL: <http://www.handsnet.org/handsnet2/welfare.reform/>
- National Service-Learning Cooperative Clearinghouse (Website) URL: <http://www.nicsl.coled.umn.edu/>
- Points of Light Foundation, PO Box 66534, Washington, DC, 20035, Vol. 703, pp. 803-8171.