

VOLUNTEERS FROM THE WORKPLACE

Beginnings: The VAC/Labor Partnership

By Shirley Keller

As Voluntary Action Centers (VACs) become more active in recruiting and involving volunteers who are employed, some are finding that contact with organized labor—through statewide organizations, Central Labor Councils and local unions—is another way to reach non-management-level workers. In addition to the obvious benefit of a new source of volunteers, VACs who involve union members cite that it also results in better working relationships between the VAC and the labor community and a more positive involvement of labor into the community's social service network.

In some instances, VACs approach their local United Way/AFL-CIO community service representative (CSR), located in approximately 375 communities. The CSR's job is to involve organized labor in social service to the community. The VACs who make use of this method usually are programs of the local United Way. But they emphasize that contact with the local labor representative does not have to depend on the VAC-United Way relationship at all.

"Since community service activities are mandated in the AFL-CIO charter," Mary Sullivan of the Louisville, Ky., VAC says, "the labor representatives and locals are glad to hear about the volunteer opportunities which exist." The Louisville VAC also works with the state AFL-CIO and central labor council and suggests that if a local United Way does not have a CSR, the state or central labor body can identify unions which might

be interested in volunteer activities.

Other VACs have gained entree into the labor community through a union member serving on their governing or advisory board. For example, as a result of the interest of a union representative on the Quincy, Ill., VAC's board, his local volunteered for a weekend Meals on Wheels program. Another means of recruitment has been through some VACs' involvement in labor-sponsored union counsellor training programs which train union members as on-the-job community service information and referral agents for fellow workers.

Jerry Lynes of the San Diego Voluntary Action Center reports that not only do the counsellors often refer their fellow workers to the VAC for placement, but they also involve themselves at times. For example, one counsellor became a regular evening entertainer at a local senior citizens home, while another volunteered to work in a residential treatment center for disturbed youth.

Once VACs make contact with a union, they utilize any or all of the "regular" recruitment methods which seem appropriate. Some give annual talks to locals to acquaint members with the importance of volunteering and discuss available placements. Some place "help wanted" volunteer columns in union newspapers; others help organize in-plant recruitment drives using union members who already are involved volunteers as head recruiters (the subject of the VAL reprint, "How to Get a Man," by the Kalamazoo VAC).

Whatever method is used, VACs generally agree that it's essential to "do your homework" with the agencies before recruitment of union members begins. Making sure that the agency understands the time constrictions of utilizing employees as volunteers, having placements—both individual as well as

group—readily available, explaining to the agency the importance of good orientation, supervision and follow-up—are just a few of the suggestions offered by VACs who successfully have linked union members with community volunteer jobs.

VACs differ in opinion as to what kinds of volunteer placements most effectively utilize the talents of union members. The VAC in San Diego, for example, feels that group projects oriented toward such physical work as resurfacing playgrounds, renovating buildings, repairing clothing from a Salvation Army Christmas drive, seem to attract the most union volunteers.

The VACs in Kalamazoo, Mich., and Louisville, Ky., on the other hand, successfully have involved individual union counsellors and other union members in ongoing one-to-one types of volunteer assignments, such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters, teaching tennis for an inner city league, working with the physically or mentally handicapped, participating in after-school recreation programs, serving as counsellors to runaways and their families.

The VAC in Quincy, Ill., which involves individuals as well as groups of union volunteers, advocates short-term or one-shot projects, such as Meals on Wheels delivery or driving hospital personnel or other essential community employees to work during blizzards.

Working with organized labor to recruit volunteers for community service projects is like working through management to involve employees. As one VAC director put it, "It takes time and careful planning to make the necessary connections. It requires the commitment of staff and resources, and patience and perseverance to make the relationship work. But these ingredients are necessary for any volunteer recruitment/placement effort to be successful."

Shirley Keller, as NCVA's director of corporate services, is responsible for the Volunteers from the Workplace project—a one-year program funded by the Charles Stewart Mott and J. M. Foundations to study and report on worker volunteer programs.