

# Volunteers and Social Services Systems

## BACKGROUND AND BASIS FOR CONCERN

A volunteer is "one who enters into or offers himself for service of his own free will". (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary 1974). Volunteering is generally regarded as work in which the rewards are other than monetary.

Historically, volunteerism has special significance in social service. The profession of social work evolved from the seeds of volunteer involvement.

Citizen participation in community affairs to a phenomenon deeply rooted in the American ethos. Early volunteers (mostly affluent) expressed religious convictions and feelings of social responsibilities through direct help to those less fortunate. In recent times, participation has been expanded to include those who had time rather than money. Then, in the last decade, application of the principle of maximum feasible participation brought a sharp upsurge of volunteer activity by the poor and by the consumer of services. Volunteer participation continued to provide a way of applying democratic principles and individual responsibility in an increasingly complex society. The practice of giving and serving continues.

Consumer advocates are promoting more openness and participation in social service, health care, legal and educational systems. No longer are professionals assumed to have a monopoly on responsibility. Rather, professionals are called upon to meet more stringent standards of accountability at the same time as citizens demand direct access to decision making positions in support of needed changes.

Volunteers cannot replace the professional nor is that the intent. Roles need to be clearly delineated to avoid exploitation and misuse, thus bringing together the parts of services into a coordinated whole.

Altruistic, service-oriented motivation appears to be increasing for men as well as for women. Volunteer opportunities for self-realization may be particularly important for women in a time of role-transition. Volunteering is not an acceptable alternative for those seeking gainful employment, but may provide an opportunity to gain self-confidence, and skills leading to employment. It should continue to be an option for those who choose it.

As the variety of volunteers expands, there should be a clearer definition of the rights and responsibilities of volunteers. Figures compiled by ACTION reveal that:

- one out of every four Americans over age thirteen does some volunteer work.
- Thirty-six percent of volunteers worked at least once a week in 1974, a twelve percent increase in a nine-year period.

- twelve percent of those with a family income below \$4,000 were part of the volunteer force.
- volunteer service hours yield the equivalent of 3,500,000 persons working full-time for one year.

Realizing the importance of volunteer service, attention is being given to providing tax allowances, certain kinds of insurance benefits and reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses such as child care and transportation. A clear rationale for such measures is to provide equal volunteer opportunity without economic penalty to the poor, minorities, women and the aged. This is of particular importance for these groups in order to gain access to volunteer positions carrying decision-making policy formulating responsibilities.

## STATEMENT OF ISSUES

The profession of social work has been operating under the assumption that volunteers form an integral part of our human service programs. To date, no attention has been given by the association to the formulation of a policy to guide social work practice in the interactive roles of professional social workers and volunteers working in policymaking, advocacy, administrative and direct service roles.

The need for such a policy is evidenced, both by concerns voiced by women's rights organizations concerned with the exploitation of women, and by the national network of organized volunteers who are dissatisfied with their working relationships with professional social workers. A recently enacted federal law defining tax exemption for non-profit agencies now makes it possible for agency volunteers to engage in political action without the constraints placed on paid staff.

All of these developments point to the need for the formulation of policy to guide professional practice in administering and administering volunteer programs in such a way as to make volunteers partners with professional social workers, as they carry out their public policymaking, advocacy and direct service roles. Experience in tested and well conceived volunteer programs demonstrated that volunteers have a special contribution to make to human services at every level of practice, that cannot be made by paid staff because of the perception of the public and clients of their professional role.

Achievement of the implementation of such a policy is dependent on making work with volunteers integral to professional training in both class and field training.

## STATEMENT OF POLICY

A. Citizens of the community should have access to the system through volunteer opportunities in policy-making, advocacy, direct services, and administration in human service agencies.

Traditional service volunteer activities continue to provide satisfaction and rewards other than money and this should not be diminished. Opportunities to participate in formulation and community decision-making have tended to be the domain of a small affluent group. Such volunteer opportunities must be expanded to include the total spectrum of citizens, as must training for effective participation.

B. Volunteer roles should be integrated into the official agency structure, emphasizing the team concept of community care delivery.

The position of volunteer services coordinator needs to be developed and expanded to provide volunteer registration, interviewing, orientation, and supervision on a systematic basis where sizable numbers of volunteers are used. Voluntary Action Centers are in a position to provide training, support and consultation. Institutionalizing volunteer status, positions and visibility within the organizational structure also insures needed credibility.

Job descriptions should delineate and make clear differences in tasks performed by paid staff and unpaid. For continuity and coordination, supervision of the program should be a paid staff function.

As the citizen effort becomes part of the official agency structure, additional questions pertaining to liability, labor management codes, and reimbursement of volunteer expenses need to be answered. Additionally, the question of insurance coverage for the professional person working with the volunteer needs to be addressed.

C. To carry out NASW's policy of non discrimination, age, sex, ethnicity, consumers and persons from all economic and cultural levels must be represented in all phases of the volunteer structure of social service systems.

Those people who have previously been denied opportunity for decision-making need to be recruited and trained to assume leadership and use it for constructive change.

D. Volunteers should not supplant or decrease the need for suitably qualified regularly employed staff.

Written policies of agencies should include the following:

- (1) a statement of assurance that volunteers will not be used to replace or decrease use of paid staff.
- (2) a clear differentiation of the functions and activities appropriate for volunteer and paid staff.
- (3) job descriptions for each category of volunteer.
- (4) provision for reimbursement of volunteer expenses as appropriate.
- (5) procedures for monitoring, evaluating and measuring volunteer activities and contributions.

## IMPLEMENTATION

A. Encourage the development of standards in agency programs to facilitate optimum participation of volunteers at all levels to maximize the development and delivery of human services.

- (1) support legislation requiring citizen involvement in federally financed programs.
- (2) support performance standards that measure client-benefits from volunteer activities.
- (3) support enrichment of programs through the broadest possible citizen involvement.
- (4) support reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses including meals, transportation, and baby-sitting.
- (5) investigate possibilities of insurance coverage.

B. Develop educational programs for social workers for effective involvement of volunteers in policy making, advocacy, administration and direct service,

- (1) in collaboration with the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), encourage development of curriculum on citizen participation.
- (2) plan workshops, and seminars for social work practitioners.

C. Draft model contract defining the relationship between the volunteer and the organization.

- (1) formulate clear volunteer job descriptions.
- (2) formulate volunteer personnel practices.
- (3) describe relationships and respective responsibilities between volunteers and professionals.

D. Support legislation to provide volunteer benefits.

- (1) tax deduction for out-of-pocket expenses.
- (2) refine legal obligations of agency and volunteer.

E. Encourage development of volunteer services coordinator positions.

- (1) encourage development of professional position of volunteer services coordinator at a supervisory or management level.
- (2) develop job specifications, including a training component.

F. Assist agencies to define volunteer tasks so that competencies gained may be evaluated by potential employers and educational institutions.

- (1) agencies should be encouraged to evaluate volunteer experience properly defined, supervised, recorded and evaluated to assess its suitability for work equivalence.
- (2) universities seeking to evaluate life experience equivalencies should also be encouraged to develop standards for assessing volunteer experience.

G. Refer this policy to the NASW-CSWE Task Force to develop standards and guidelines for implementing social work education.

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