

# VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

## support from must come the top

**SUSAN J ELLIS** on the executive role in the success of volunteer programmes.

In Great Britain as well as in the United States, the field of volunteer management is coming into its own. More and more people are approaching the leadership of volunteers as a career, rather than as simply a job. While there has been an enormous increase in professional skills, there are also frustrations. A phrase I still hear too often as a trainer in volunteerism is: "This is a great idea, but I'll never be able to sell it to my administrator."

After nine years of consulting and training in the United States and Canada (and after six years previously fighting my own battles with superiors as a director of volunteers), I have come to the conclusion that unless the very top level of an organization provides tangible support to a volunteer program, it will never reach its full potential. There are some things over which the director of volunteers, as middle management, simply has no authority. In too many cases, top administrators have separated themselves from any responsibility for volunteers.

Give any administrator a sum of money, stipulate that it must be spent on employee salaries, and watch what s/he does. Chances are great that s/he would assess agency needs, write job descriptions, advertise the openings, screen candidates, orient the new workers, and assign them a place in the organisation. What seems obvious as a personnel plan for employees gets all muddled when it comes to volunteers. Yet volunteers are the 'nonsalaried personnel' of the agency — and numerically may even outnumber employees. Is it reasonable for the executive to take an approach of benign neglect to this human resource?

The sad fact is that volunteers are the *invisible* management issue. Volunteerism will not mature as a field until everyone recognises that volunteers must be fully integrated into an agency's planning and activities. Volunteers are not 'icing' on service delivery, they are one of the main ingredients!

There are many administrative concerns about volunteers needing attention from top decision-makers. Just a few follow.

Why is this organization utilizing volunteers? The answer to this basic but critical question must be decided on the executive level. It is connected to subsequent decisions, such as: what are the best ways for

us to utilize volunteers? Will any assignments be reserved only for salaried staff? Will we accept referrals of prospective volunteers from special referral sources such as schools, courts, or mental health centers? If these and other questions are considered together, it will be possible to formulate a written 'Statement of Philosophy' about volunteers.

This philosophy then needs to be implemented by the setting of policy. This establishes standards for everyone to attain — and helps to articulate a vision for the utilization of volunteers. In this way, the director of volunteers has a clear direction and is not left with the burden of defining volunteerism for the agency.

Volunteers are not 'free'. Though the value of their services is way beyond the actual cash cost of supporting their work, the volunteer program needs a budget. The most common mistake is to allocate funds for the volunteer program based on how many salaried employees staff the program. But the volunteer office recruits many multiples of people to serve as volunteers — which means a proportionate need for additional equipment and supplies of all sorts. There are also out-of-the-ordinary expenses such as balloons for the volunteer recognition event! Further, there is the administrative decision of whether or not to offer reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses incurred by volunteers.

Staffing of the volunteer program is another top management issue. What criteria have been established for the position of volunteer program leader? Directing volunteers demands a unique combination of skills. If someone is hired purely because s/he is 'nice and will get along with people', that person may not have the ability to manage the large amount of recordkeeping, scheduling and other details required by a thriving volunteer program. On the other hand, if the person is hired largely for clerical skills, can s/he provide the motivation and energy also necessary to lead volunteers?

This is an even greater issue when it comes to designating someone already on staff to handle responsibility for the volunteer program as an *additional* function. Will this person be freed of some present tasks to allow time for the new demands of volunteer management? Does this person *want* this assignment? (It is reasonable to assume that only someone who is enthusiastic about

working with volunteers will do the best job at it). Does the present supervisor of the newly-designated part-time director of volunteers understand that this new responsibility will divert energy from what that worker accomplished previously?

The biggest obstacle to successful involvement of volunteers is tension between volunteers and employees. Unless the top administrator takes an active role in enforcing good volunteer/salaried staff relationships, they probably will not happen. The director of volunteers simply does not have the authority to enforce resistant staff members to cooperate.

It is important to realize that practically no one learns how to work with volunteers as part of formal professional education. How many people are taught about volunteer management in college or graduate school? In the real world, many workers discover that they are expected to team up with volunteers. But *they don't know how*. Worse, because they perceive themselves to be 'professionals', they feel uncomfortable in asking for help on a subject which should be 'easy', right? Wrong.

Agency management should provide *training* on the skills of supervising volunteers. The responsibility for working with volunteers should be included in all staff job descriptions. And the whole process should be reinforced by evaluating employees on how well they work with volunteers, as one criterion in an annual performance assessment.

There are other tangible ways that executives can demonstrate to staff and to volunteers that their teamwork is valued. For example, volunteers can be assigned to work with administrators themselves, modelling that everyone's work can be shared. Volunteers can also be invited to participate in planning sessions, showing that the organization wants input as well as 'help'.

Gaining full support for volunteers simply cannot be left to the director of volunteers. When agency executives involve themselves in decision-making for the volunteer program, they send a message to the rest of staff. That message is that volunteers are *important*, and that full cooperation will be expected from everyone to integrate volunteers into the service delivery of the organization. Then the director of volunteers can be held accountable for finding the best possible volunteers and for helping the rest of the staff to utilize volunteers creatively.

Susan J Ellis is president of Energize Associates, a consulting, training and publishing firm specialising in volunteerism. She has conducted training seminars throughout the United States and Canada. She is also editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Volunteer Administration*. The material in this article is based on her new book, *From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success* available from Energize Books, 5450 Wissahickon Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19144, USA. Price US \$19 (international money orders or cheques drawn on US Banks only, please).

A videotape *Colleagues: the volunteer/employee relationship*, a joint venture of Energize Associates and the Moss Rehabilitation Hospital, is also available in either VHS, Beta or U-Matic format. Based on material presented in the book, it is available from Energize Books price US \$365.