

THE VOLUNTEER ON AN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Harriet H. Naylor

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"The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of function performed by private citizens," as Alexis de Toqueville noted a long time ago. In Jon von Til's concept of volunt'ism, we deal with three rather special forms of advisory committees:

Those of us associated with Volunteer Bureaus/Voluntary Action Centers immediately think of the one attached to them when they are part of a larger organization such as United Way or a Community Planning Council. Usually the chairman also sits on the Board of Directors of the parent organization which enjoys policy determination powers denied to the sub-group. If not represented on that board, the only route open to the policy legislative process is through staff to the executive/president team which ideally takes advice from the Advisory Committee very seriously. In actual practice this gap unjustly places staff in a very difficult role complicated by possible conflict of interests, and often creates a chasm in communications very difficult to bridge.

HEW on January 1, 1977 had three hundred odd advisory committees, related to almost every special interest in human services. Formerly governed by Public Law 92-463, passed October 6, 1972, its regulations (38 FR2306) which took effect in 1973, were amended by a recissim in the regulations published March 27, 1974. The latest Annual Comprehensive Review of federal advisory committees was published for informing interested publics in the Federal Register for March 18, 1977. Each review tends to eliminate some and add some new ones. New legislation is very likely to mandate this form of citizen activity. It is not volunteer in the usual sense, since a generous per diem as well as expense allowance comes with the service rendered. The general public is invited to comment on the service and need for each committee, but the most active and fervent supporters are often the providers of services in the voluntary sector who certainly have an intense vested interest in such advisory committee recommendations. A cynical article in the Washington Post (May 2, 1976) says, "When in doubt, form a committee. Washington bureaucrats have obeyed that rule for more than a quarter of a century...so that individuals from the private sector can theoretically assist the federal bureaucracy in formulating public policy."

In the past three years I have frequently suggested volunteers with direct service experience as candidates for advisory committee membership. Some have simply disappeared at least by the change of Administrations after the 1976 election. Others have called or written to complain that their participation was not appreciated, their wisdom not used and no one listened to their suggestions. I firmly believe that only adult educators or group workers come into federal government service with knowledge of group dynamics and work with volunteers in their professional armoire of skills.

Many highly competent and firmly entrenched civil servants would be much happier without having to do the staff work which an Advisory Committee requires in order to be effective. It is easier and they would rather decide for themselves. An exception in my personal experience was an advisory committee on which I served for three years, which produced the first credible statistics from a volunteer survey, and then manuals for increasing the volunteer potential in the field of rehabilitation. But even with wide dissemination of that study and the manuals, an extremely able and informed committee has made little dent on the field: the 1976 state reports on rehabilitation programs in the states which are funded by HEW has no word about volunteers. It may take another three year study to find out the impact of the first one!

The Post article goes on to point out that, "for the most part, a relatively small group of the same people from business, labor and government serve." We seem not to involve consumers, the poor or volunteers, but an elite of relatively advantaged and far from disinterested persons, over and over again. "Specifically," according to a 1412 page index to the membership of federal advisory committees, "196 persons serve on anywhere from 4 to 15 committees: 107 persons serve on four advisory committees, 47 persons serve on 5, 21 on 6 and 21 others on seven or more."..."The index also shows that 29 large companies have from 21 to 95 representatives...universities and institutes have 23 to 35 representatives and the AFL-CIO has 92. The growth of these quasi-governmental bodies is apparently endless."

The President in a letter of February 25, 1977 ordered a government-wide "zero-base review of all Federal advisory committees with the presumption that all committees should be abolished except those

- (1) for which there is a compelling need
- (2) which have truly balanced membership
- (3) which conduct their business as openly as possible consistent with the law and its mandate.

Further, the President's message urges agency heads to make appropriate recommendations on administrative committees and to confer with Congress about abolishing statutory committees which do not meet the above standards." These reviews are still going on under OMB, with public comments invited. In addition, ten states have Program Review Teams for Social Security Administration, and many medical committees have sub groupings for research policy review, as well. Many are so highly technical that most average citizens would feel uncomfortable participating although their neutral disinterested concern for what happens to people could introduce very healthy sunshine to the process involved.

Only last week, the proposed demise of three advisory committees was contained in new legislation to end the Federal Hospital Council, the National Advisory Committee on Nursing and the Health Insurance Benefits Advisory Council because, according to the White House, they "have outlined their usefulness or are not providing truly balanced advice and recommendations." Such criteria could mean the end of many very specialized advisory committees, such as the Advisory Council on Education Statistics, or our Secretary's Advisory Committee on Population Affairs. The eventual outcome is unpredictable, since other forms of citizen participation are being tried, such as the 100 country wide local hearings on National health insurance which started October 45h.

The most hopeful sign about advisory committees at this point is the continuing proliferation of local community or project level groupings being mandated by new laws as part of the "new federalism." The most dramatic example is the Parent Councils in schools receiving money under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Made up with a majority of parent "consumers", many of whom carried administrative volunteer or staff responsibilities under Head Start. They are being heard, and helping the more traditional groups such as the PTA's to articulate changes needed and take activist postures, such as the current campaign against violence on TV. The CAP experience has brought a new generation of citizens who are no longer willing simply to rubberstamp staff decisions. The most needed service for active voluntary advocates is also needed by all people undertaking committee or board membership, orientation to the group process of decision-making and skill building for techniques of influencing people. The legal sanctions for the organization set its limits, and are often discovered painfully if not learned before a controversy gets hot.

Orientation helps people to broaden parochial and turf interests and to understand the perspectives of others involved. Staff need

orientation to committee work just as much as volunteers do, to allay unnecessary anxiety, and analyse their responsibilities to furnish appropriate information and background for a sound decision-making process. In fact, one staff function is often to delay precipitous decisions before all the needed data is in, to point out significant trends and forecast projections. The lay persons, consumers or potential consumers on the committee, or the busy professionals from other agencies simply do not have the time or resources to dig out for themselves.

On the other hand, the volunteers may have much more experience in that community, know its history, customs, leadership patterns and aspirations. All of these factors should influence the program and policy development process in assessing community readiness and setting realistic, feasible objectives. This wisdom must be valued by the staff, drawn out and discussed openly, or the volunteers will conclude, as their national counterparts did, that their opinions are not important, and they are likely to react either by resignation, apathy, absence or as adversaries to all the providers and experts. Actually, volunteers need to realize that their neutral perspective has great value in the decision-making process, and their leanings may tip the balance of the group decision.

Perceptions of advisory roles vary tremendously. Many people assume that because there is no authority to finalize policy decisions, there is no real power. However, power is often ascribed to people without official authority, but because their experience, expertise or perspective is respected. Ivan Scheier often makes a good case for including service volunteers among policy and program development groups because of their first hand knowledge and the commitment gained from direct service. In some groups, the service volunteer may be the only person abreast of current realities.

Training for board members has been resisted by many staff who feel that the prestigious people they have would resent it. We have some certainty that those organizations whose volunteers develop the deepest commitment begin that process with orientation and training at the outset. This is an area that merits research, for those of us trained as trainers are certainly biased as we observe how much volunteers seem to appreciate learning opportunities. HEW makes no effort to train Advisory Committees, and assumes their intrinsic qualifications preclude the need.

The new Life Long Learning Act of 1976 holds to the concept that everyone needs learning opportunities, and experimental modules are being examined for implementation in various settings. Volunteer Service in itself is valuable learning, and service on an advisory board is recognition of that fact when volunteers are promoted. Volunteer careers demand promotion and new learning opportunities just as staff ones do. We as an organization of Voluntary Action Scholars should be leading the way!