

Ethical Issues in Volunteer Management and Accountability

F. Ellen Netting

The Reagan Administration has proclaimed a decentralized approach to social service delivery,¹ and one of the rallying cries has been "Go back to the voluntary sector." In a speech to the National Alliance of business, Reagan explained that "volunteering is an essential part of our plan to give the government back to the people."² This appeal may warm the heartstrings of the American public; even social workers, at first, may feel compelled to turn a watchful eye to the voluntary sector. After all, was not social work spawned out of the voluntary womb and nurtured by the Judeo-Christian tradition? Langston has explained, however, that this new emphasis "involves an entirely new expectation of the voluntary sector as a corrective force in American society."³

This article examines the ethical issues surrounding the directive to "Go back to the voluntary sector."⁴ It is based on the assumption that it is impossible to "go back" because the voluntary sector,⁵ the voluntary agency, the volunteer program, and the volunteer⁶ have changed.

MANAGING VOLUNTARY AGENCIES

Salamon has contended that the voluntary sector is undergoing an identity crisis:

As of 1980, nonprofit organizations received a larger share of their total income from the federal government alone than from all private giving combined. . . . So the nonprofit organizations turn out to be the major providers of publicly funded services—a startling development that most people in this country don't really understand.⁷

Major trends affecting voluntary agencies include reduced government support; increased competition for private funding; new emphasis on earned income; increased competition from for-profit firms in traditionally nonprofit areas, increased concern of for-profit organizations about the nonprofit sector's encroachment on commercial enterprise; and finally, greater concern about man-

agement. "Taken together, these trends seem to be pushing [voluntary agencies] farther and farther from their roots and their basic distinguishing characteristics."⁸

Given these trends and the competition between sectors, administrators in voluntary agencies may encounter numerous ethical issues. Two examples follow:

A social work director of a church-related retirement community found that although the agency bore the church's name, the parent religious body had no intention of backing the organization financially or legally. She was aware that elderly residents believed they were "safe" because of the religious affiliation. The affiliation was a good marketing device, yet it gave residents a false sense of security.

Members of the voluntary board of a child care institution seemed to be ignorant of many changes in services. The social work administrator decided to conduct a special training session for the board. He handed around the institution's mission statement. Pointing out that it was long outdated. The board, however, contended that if the mission statement were updated, many private contributors would quit giving, because the organization's purpose had changed so much over the years. The board members wanted to leave the mission statement as it was.

A parent religious body can agree to act as a sponsor, without being financially and legally responsible for the affiliate, as long as the parent organization is careful about how its name is used. Mission statements are often outdated and seldom reviewed. For the social work administrator, these situations raise ethical issues.

MANAGING VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

Not only does the administrator of a voluntary agency confront such dilemmas, but social work program directors and direct practitioners also confront ethical

issues. It is not always easy to work with volunteers, and occasionally tensions arise between paid and volunteer staff.

A 1977 NASW Policy Statement addressed volunteer management: "Volunteers should not supplant or decrease the need for suitably qualified regularly employed staff." The statement also presented guidelines for written policies.⁹ This statement is not limited to the voluntary agency, however, as volunteers are also found in public settings. It is possible, however, that the voluntary agency has an edge on the volunteer pool. Thus, some organizations were begun by a voluntary association (for example, by the Presbyterian Church, the Gray Panthers, or the Junior League) and in these instances, there may be a sense of ownership by a group of volunteers that is not found in the public agency.

A number of trends in volunteer management are evident in the literature: an emphasis on training social workers to develop programs that coordinate volunteers,¹⁰ a push to "professionalize" the role of the volunteer coordinator,¹¹ a renewed emphasis on establishing and supporting client self-help groups,¹² and discussion about recruiting volunteers from traditionally underused groups (the aged, for example).¹³ These trends bring with them the potential for ethical conflicts. Two examples follow:

A social worker took a newly created paid position, "director of volunteers." He had been on the job a short time when he learned that he was to recruit 20 volunteers with MSWs to assess clients in the evenings, when regular staff members were not available. He was told that regular paid staff would not be replaced, but that how the agency would be able to serve clients during evening hours. He was aware, however, that these volunteer social workers were professionals. He wondered if they should be paid for doing what they normally do at their jobs in other agencies.

A paid director of volunteers in a senior

center recruited outreach volunteers to act in the role of "friendly visitor." The director learned that two senior volunteers had begun discussing their clients publicly, which was obviously a breach of confidentiality. When questioned, they responded, "Well, just try and stop us. We are doing you a favor. Besides that we are volunteers and you can't fire us." The director explained that they could be fired and gave them a warning. They continued to discuss their fellow senior citizens, who were clients. The director fired them. They continued to come to the center and to talk.

IMPLICATIONS

Ethical conflicts are inevitable. However, there are some proactive steps that social workers can take in developing the potential of voluntary organizations and programs.

First, the voluntary agency staff and board can ask what makes their organization "voluntary." Years ago, this question may have conjured up images of cadres of volunteers, status-oriented voluntary boards, money from private contributors, and a focus on a specific client group. Today, however, vestiges of voluntarism may be difficult to identify.

Once the agency has determined what makes it "voluntary," it must then determine what it wants to be. A social work administrator may want to form a task force to review the current mission statement to see if and how the agency's mission may have changed. Here, one might ask, "What do we want our agency to represent?" and "What image do we want to project?"

It may be that the mission really has changed—that the agency no longer focuses on its original goals, or the agency has strayed so far from its original mission that its goals have been displaced. Struggling with its reason for being is particularly important to the voluntary organization today when the entire voluntary sector is struggling with its identity.

It is hoped that mission statements are client-centered, in other words, describe what group or groups the organization intends to serve. If the organization began as a small operation serving only one group and has expanded to serving groups with various needs, the mission should reflect this diversification. It may be that the voluntary organization no longer serves the particular group of clients it was created to serve and should no longer address this group at all. Tightening up and trying to provide quality services to the original group is an alter-

native that may be viable in a different situation. Some voluntary agencies may lose their identity because they try to diversify so quickly that they forget what they originally intended to do.

Constituency

The agency must identify its constituents, who are supporters or may act as resources. Because the voluntary agency may have originally been created by a voluntary association or a group of community people who had identified a "need," clues to the identity of these constituents can be found in examining the agency's roots. This voluntary constituency or "community" may have ceased to exist or may have been forgotten. That community may represent a base of support from which to draw resources and with which to regain an identity.

Looking back to a long-forgotten community of constituents may have its drawbacks, however. It may be that the agency has changed so much that it has nothing in common with that community or can no longer identify with the community's philosophy. Therefore, taking a hard look at the agency's former constituency may not resolve the search for identity; rather, it may complicate the search.

The voluntary board may represent the constituency with which the agency identifies. Depending on that board's philosophy, professional staff and board members may be in conflict. The astute administrator may want to hold working meetings in which staff and board clarify their respective roles and responsibilities. Such communications, however, may raise additional questions. Possibly, some board and staff members will find that they do not want to be a part of the organization, and leave, but those that remain will have clarified their respective positions with respect to the agency's mission.

Volunteers

The organization may want to reexamine its pool of volunteers. It may be that volunteers are used in many areas—as board members, fund-raisers, outreach workers, and so forth. It is possible that some volunteer roles are so taken for granted that their value is not recognized. Or it may be that volunteers are not being used properly and that retention is a problem.

Once current roles are identified, the agency may want to evaluate how the volunteers fit with the agency's need. Are volunteers being utilized appropriately? Are there areas in which volunteers could be used better? Do volunteers perform busywork or do they perform

needed tasks? What is the relationship between professional staff and volunteers? What is the agency's philosophy regarding volunteers?

In addition, it would be helpful to survey volunteers to determine why they were attracted to the organization and why they have stayed in it. Because word of mouth advertising and "asking for assistance" appear to be the best recruitment techniques, enlisting volunteers to assist in obtaining additional volunteers may be the most effective recruitment. This, however, should be done only after the agency knows its identity and determines what it needs from volunteers.

Coordinators of volunteers may want to redefine volunteer roles, based on their new investigations. This may include revising volunteer job descriptions, restructuring required training, and developing more refined screening systems. In short, active volunteers need to know that the organization is willing to invest time and resources in their program.

Coordination with Staff

Workshops for staff and volunteers can be invaluable—to identify potential areas of conflict and to work together to solve problems. This requires a real commitment on the agency's part. However, there are definite benefits: Volunteers and staff begin to communicate; areas of overlap can be identified; and current difficulties can be aired. A proactive approach to future dilemmas may prevent some potential conflicts or at least alert staff to possible problem areas.

PRACTITIONERS' RESPONSIBILITY

There are potential ethical conflicts in every social work situation, and voluntary agencies are no exception. Examining the agency's mission, clients, constituents, and volunteers may be risky if the organization is not willing to work on its identity. Social work practitioners, however, have an ethical responsibility to challenge themselves and their organizations so that clients and volunteers do not receive conflicting messages.

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