

Issues on Volunteerism

The following list of major issues facing the voluntary sector was developed by the NCVC, '76 Steering Committee to be used as a questionnaire in the Local and District Forums. Participants in these forums will be asked to discuss and vote "yes" or "no" on the questions. Final tabulation of the responses to the questionnaires will serve to document the position of a cross-section of the voluntary sector on each issue. We have attempted below to raise some of the basic issues involved in each question.

Tax Issues

1. *Should a volunteer be allowed a tax deduction or a tax credit for volunteer time?*

Arguments in favor: that it is inconsistent to allow a tax deduction for donation of money or property to a charity, but not for donation of services to the same organization; that it affords governmental recognition of the importance of volunteers and their work; and that it will provide an incentive for persons from all income levels to become volunteers, thus reducing the stigma of elitism attached to volunteering. Arguments against: that it will adversely affect volunteering by attaching a monetary value to services voluntarily given; that it is impossible to value equitably the time of volunteers; and that the potential revenue consequences for the federal government would make these proposals unacceptable.

2. *Should volunteers be allowed a tax deduction for the amount paid for dependent child care services (babysitting, day care) enabling volunteer service?*

The assumption is that day care and babysitting are out-of-pocket expenses and should be allowed as a tax deduction or credit for volunteers as they are for employed individuals. This would increase the supply of volunteers, especially from middle and low income families. It can also be argued that such expenditures, like costs for clothing, are personal expenses; that such costs are not actually paid during the performance of the volunteer service and thus should not be compared to other deductible items such as mileage; and that such a credit or deduction would place an additional burden on the Treasury.

3. *Should volunteers receive reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses in connection with their volunteer service, such as meals, transportation, parking costs, etc?*

Many active volunteers feel that the contribution of their time and talents should be free from unreimbursed out-of-pocket expenses. Currently, limited deductions are allowed: those who do not itemize incur the full expense; those who itemize realize part of the expense. Major arguments in behalf of reimbursement are the facilitation of voluntary action and equity. On the other hand, administrative and cost barriers are cited as difficulties.

Employment Issues

1. *Should volunteers receive school, college, or employment credits for volunteer experience?*

The "volunteer professional" is considered to be in every way (hiring, firing, training, supervision, promotion, etc.) a professional staff member, except that he or she is not paid. Ready movement from the "volunteer professional" world to the "paid professional" world is also assumed. The quality of volunteer experience would thus justify receipt of academic and employment credits, as, for example, in the recognition of experience by state civil service commissions. Are volunteer professional and paid professional positions fully analogous? Would monitoring be counterproductive for volunteers and the agency?

2. *Should volunteers continue to work during a strike of paid staff?*

There are important distinctions between a volunteer crossing a picket line to perform his or her normal duties and crossing a picket line to fill a striking worker's job. Some considerations might include: that any decision should be made on a case by case basis; that any decision should be left to individual conscience; that volunteers should cross a picket line only when the health or safety of other persons is involved. The view of organized labor is that volunteers should be "neutral bystanders" during any labor dispute.

3. *Should there be laws or regulations requiring minimum insurance and other liability protection for volunteers serving in public or voluntary organizations?*

Volunteers (and their organizations) may be held liable for acts of the volunteers involving outside parties. Similarly, organizations may be liable to volunteers for injuries due to job-related accidents. Should volunteers for state agencies be deemed 'employees' for purposes of workmen's compensation and liability protection? Should there be a law or a regulation which would provide for uniform coverage of all volunteers by requiring organizations using volunteers to have a comprehensive plan of liability insurance? Such coverage would afford protection for the volunteer and would enable the organization to recognize its potential legal liability in a wide variety of situations. But wouldn't such coverage require costly premium expenditures which might further deplete the budgets of voluntary organizations and divert monies away from service projects? Should workmen's compensation, which is specifically provided by law, be extended to volunteers serving in the private sector by permitting the board of directors of the private agency to declare its volunteers "employees"? Who should pay the costs of the insurance premium, the volunteer or the public or private agency?

Government Funding

1. *Should government money be used to support and encourage local volunteer bureaus and voluntary action centers?* If private voluntary organizations receive public money, will they have to yield an essential measure of control over their purposes, budgets, personnel and policies? On the other hand, does the amount of public money received make a difference in the services the organization can provide?

2. *Should private voluntary organizations receive governmental money to assist them in developing volunteer programs?*

Does the gain in being able to develop a volunteer program outweigh the potential government control that receipt of public money—though a small and temporary amount—may entail? Would this be a justifiable exception to a general policy of not seeking public funds?

3. *Should increased funding be sought for federal programs in this general area, such as VISTA, Foster Grandparents, etc.?*

This question raises the issue of the federal government's role in the broad area of volunteerism. Do these programs serve a sufficiently important public purpose to justify their expansion?

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Does the fact that volunteers are paid nominal salaries (stipends) and provided with insurance dilute the traditional concept of volunteering as donated service? Do these payments provide an advantage in recruitment of volunteers to the detriment of essential private volunteer programs? Should private organizations carry major responsibility for volunteer programs, with government assuming a small and complementary role?

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