

VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATION AS PROFESSIONAL WORK

When I read Ellen Straus' pamphlet on The Professional Volunteer my first plea was, let's professionalize the paid leaders first! The 1970 Census Bureau classified work which brings volunteers into organization staffing patterns as "miscellaneous clerical work." The 1974 study they did for ACTION came up with some interesting figures, such as that 40% of all volunteers are men. And only 2% of all volunteers are trying to get a paid job by volunteering. But there were no questions raised about paid leaders, because the random sample used was not large enough for statistical inferences, being somewhere between 20 and 70 thousand people among two hundred million. Now is the time for us to tell the 1980 Census what we want to know about this field and how it has grown, since they are inviting questions. If we expect to command respect from executives and other staff, it might be worth the discipline to form a real profession.

The Department of Labor has classification authority over all other federal offices, including the Census Bureau. They agreed to a career lattice concept in principle, and are working on the 1976 Dictionary of Occupational Titles now. The latest word is that the complete text on linotron tapes will be delivered to the Government Printing Office by October 1, including a professional classification description by the California Field Center which handles all professions.

The printing should follow immediately to insure that publication takes place as committed during the Bicentennial Year. I shall draw a great sigh of relief when I see it in print!

This process was a thought provoking experience for me, as I expect it will be for us all to take the DOT definitions to personnel administrators and Civil Service to translate the definitions into operational practice salary and schedules, so that people will be treated as professionals on their jobs.

One of my learnings was a clear distinction between professional and non-professional occupations: in a profession the work requires a high level of wisdom and complex decisions which cannot be standardized. In other words, there is no one single right answer, but we have to weigh various factors and apply our knowledge which has been accumulated from experience as well as from education. In fact, there are very few graduates of formal education in our field. People have entered from almost every conceivable former occupation, most recently a striking number of persons from religious occupations, which is consistent with the ACTION study findings that 50% of all volunteering is under religious auspices. We wonder if the happenstance selection of Holy Week in 1974 had any influence on that finding! But the field of volunteer administration also includes teachers, social workers, public relations experts, salesmen, nurses, public administration experts, rehabilitation counsellors, recreation people.

Each contributes a valuable perspective to a new technology which is becoming a profession: the accurate matching of people needs to people resources, in order to realize the fuller human potential of all the humans involved!

Volunteering is not unique to the USA, nor is volunteer administration, but it is peculiar to democratic societies to have directors of coordinators paid to develop volunteering. Authoritarian societies have lots of people giving orders to other people, but you have to have faith in individual dignity and rights to trust people to want to do good things. A great deal of the New Federalism legislation mandates citizen participation in decision-making about health, education and welfare services. Citizen advocacy is on the rise, and community development is "in." Who will make these local and project decisions? Those with self interest as consumers, and those who have jobs at stake as providers of services, are mandated. We need some neutral interpreters between the two, someone who is perceived as altruistic even if he, too, is getting a lot out of the experience. Many volunteers don't realize the importance of what they know from first hand observation and experience, and don't know how influential they could be.

Professional responsibilities in volunteer administration include giving volunteers chances to progress with growth in capacities, and organizing a way for these dedicated individuals to influence the goal setting, planning and delivery systems of programs. In short, organizing a volunteer feedback structure through which volunteers

can speak in evaluation and planning. The more people involved in planning, the more people have as an individual personal objective to make that plan work. Volunteer directors have strong feelings themselves about not being included in staff planning groups. How much more remote from the locus of decision-making is the volunteer! How long will persons continue to serve. Drop out studies show that some volunteers join the staff in order to get in on the information they feel staff gets and they are blocked from. Building a true partnership means much better quality and quantity of communication between volunteers and staff, particularly administration. The Volunteer Director is the gatekeeper, link and facilitator.

Our function, as professional volunteer administrators, is to give them confidence gained through valid learning opportunities on the job, in the community in cooperative events, and under accredited college or university auspices.

Our profession not only links the public to our organizations, but we also control the mobility of the public among agencies. Often the volunteer has the only continuous relationship to a service recipient when he moves from one specialized service to another. Board members seldom serve in just one organization since rotation is required by most by-laws today, and wisdom from one agency is valuable to others. We have helped a great deal in finding policy-relevant decision making opportunities for consumers of services, and

now must turn to the free volunteer who often holds the balance of power between conflicting self-interests.

Volunteer Directors and Coordinators are entrusted with several precious human commodities, or values. Volunteering is one acceptable way to express compassion and the common human need to be needed.

Where one gives one's time and effort is important, and the decisions sometimes require a weighing of conflicting values, and making difficult choices. Our decisions rest on alertness to conflicting values and some firm convictions which will sustain us if our decisions are called into question. One reason for a professional association is to have some agreed upon ethics and values which are accepted and believed in by the members, who then can support one another in what are often lonely jobs as the only person among other staff in different disciplines.

Some occupations are formed around a science - even librarians speak of theirs. Conflicts between people needs and tangibles are involved. We have all know some library scientists who are happier when their resources are neatly organized than when they are being used. It is only human for us to escape into the techniques of our work, which we are sure of, when our emotions are likely to become too involved. We do use the so-called "soft" sciences in analysing people and their motivations, and we use the art of persuasion sometimes, always with the danger of foretting that freedom of choice is

the heart of voluntarism. The right of choice should be preserved for the volunteer, as Cynthia Nathan used to say, and the paid staff partner where there is one. Like all rights to freedom, it carries responsibilities with it, which means the obligation to take orientation to the setting and supplementary skill training as needed. Life long learning is part of volunteering.

Having disagreed with professionalizing volunteers because I believe their spontaneity and common sense is valuable, I agree heartily with Ellen Straus on contracts, preferably written, with volunteers because they insure that all the persons involved have agreed on similar expectations. I hope they are worked out with everyone involved participating, and freely entering into the relationships described. Job descriptions are fine for beginners, but are soon out-grown. Therefore, contracts need a systematic review in a regular cyclical pattern, so they may be adjusted to match growth and changing conditions. The Volunteer Director may monitor this process or delegate it, but must insure that it happens. Then training, recognition, horizontal or upward mobility are based on demonstrable accomplishments and abilities which add up to readiness for further training and a change of assignment.

There are two key concepts in professionalizing which are up to the individual to balance: "self-discipline" and "enthusiasm." If a practitioner goes overboard either way, there is danger to the other people involved, and loss of the trust and respect which is essential

to good working relationships and credibility in the eyes of other staff and the public. Enthusiasm sometimes desensitizes us and overwhelms reservations other people should be free to express.

Volunteer administrators have an obligation to build a body of knowledge through research, much more detailed and precise recording. A profession can not depend so much on intuition and limited experience. Volunteers may not anticipate the need to document their experience, but we must. We have to develop categories of assignments for volunteers which are transferable to work applications and records and understandable to people outside our own field of practice. I recommend building on Francine Sobey's taxonomy for mental health service responsibilities:

Caretaking - including escort services, nutrition, group leadership, making secure the vulnerable or frail, home repair services, etc.

Staff Assistance - including case or classroom aides, clerical work, recreation assistants, etc. under direct supervision of paid workers.

Social Sustenance - the friendly visitor, telephone reassurer, Big Brothers and Sisters, etc.

Bridging - the linking volunteer who interprets agency services, represents community to intitutionalized, ombudsmen for individuals and their families to agencies, etc.

Advocate - the person in touch with target groups who speaks for them as a "class" in mobilizing community or legislative support, etc.

Special Skill - discussion leader, artist, musician, writer, athlete, trainer, recruiter, discussion leader, officer, professional person, expert doing his own thing!

Community Representative - the long time resident who knows everyone and everything that's happened, often the "gatekeeper" for delivery of services and interpreter of local history and experience to newcomers.

The first four are Ms. Sobey's, and relate to service roles. The last three are more likely to be in indirect supportive services or administrative leadership roles which also include board or committee service. If schools, welfare offices, hospitals, rehabilitation facilities all used similar categories, we could have more confidence in our statistics and reports. If assessment of community resources and needs could be framed in a similar family of volunteer words, we would be better able to communicate between fields and with potential volunteers.

Responsible recording and reporting illustrate some of the disciplines required. We also need more attention to a general philosophical base.

What do we consider really important? Why do we do what we do? Some traditional professions are having a hard time after years of status, because they contain an unethical minority who have destroyed public confidence in lawyers to work for justice and doctors for health above self interest. Educators and social workers are having a particularly hard time convincing people about their professional expertise, perhaps because they took public support for granted for a generation or two. Max Lerner says that not only is there still a "Shame of the Cities" as described by Lincoln Steffens which the lawyers and doctors have not corrected, but that Steffens today would probe the shame of the professions, for putting self-interest above service goals. The providers seem to be more likely to cheat than the recipients, although the reverse myth persists. I believe volunteers will keep volunteer administrators honest, but I plead for ever improving our capacities through continuous learning, to raise our competencies to be professional persons in the best sense of the word. As caring persons, working with caring staff and caring individuals from the community, we will earn professional status in our own right because our responsibility is essential to preserve freedom and pluralism. We have organizing power to create unity out of diversity through channeling the compassion in each person with whom we work toward humane goals. When that becomes a part of each one of us, we will be guardians of people's rights, and reach out to those who most need the service and relationships volunteers offer. As Jethro told Moses, our work "will bring glory because the needs of the people will be met!"