

ABSTRACT

In 1997, 11 agencies in the Waterloo Region (Ontario, Canada)¹ committed to "supported volunteering" formed The Resource Group for Supported Volunteering (R.G.S.V.). Assisted by Trillium Foundation funding, the R.G.S.V. launched its project, "Opportunities for All," which aimed to discover the potential for supported volunteering in community agencies. For purposes of "Opportunities for All," supported volunteering means ensuring full participation in volunteering by persons with disabilities through the provision of additional placement assistance, volunteer placement development and accommodation, coaching on the (volunteer) job, and/or other forms of needed support. The project design included a) a literature review, b) a survey of 197 community agencies in the Waterloo Region, and c) focus groups with volunteers, prospective volunteers and agency representatives. This article focuses on the results of the community agency survey. Of 89 responding organizations, 85 percent reported utilization of between one and over 100 volunteers with one disability or more. Only 2 percent of the entire sample was unwilling to consider using persons with disabilities as volunteers in the future. Further research into this previously unexplored aspect of volunteerism is encouraged.

Opportunities for All: The Potential for Supported Volunteering in Community Agencies

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INTRODUCTION

"Opportunities for All," a project focused on the current and future extent of supported volunteering in the Waterloo Region in Ontario, Canada, was launched by The Resource Group for Supported Volunteering (R.G.S.V.), formed in 1997. The Trillium Foundation of Ontario funded the project. The R.G.S.V. comprised 11 agencies whose mission is to serve persons with physical disabilities or promote voluntary action in the community.

Philosophy

The philosophical basis for R.G.S.V.'s activities is:

- commitment to "assisting all persons to participate in satisfying, productive volunteer experiences...." Removal of "barriers to full participation by educating and supporting community members, identifying and developing resources that promote accessibility and supporting individuals to cultivate their potential"

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John A. Vedell retired in December 1995 after 21 years as executive director of Family Services of Hamilton-Wentworth in Ontario, Canada. Before his move into the social services field in 1969, John served as a clergyman, principally as a chaplain to Lutheran students in various universities in eastern Canada. Throughout his career, he has encouraged and supported volunteerism. John currently teaches life-span psychology at Mohawk College in Hamilton, Ontario, coaches not-for-profits on governance issues, is on the board of the St. Joseph Immigrant Women's Centre of Hamilton, and is a volunteer peer reviewer in Family Service Ontario's accreditation program.

- belief “that all persons have the right to informed choice and equal access to fully participate in the opportunities they choose for themselves....” Belief “in encouraging independence, individual growth, mutual respect, cooperative relationships, and partnerships within an understanding and welcoming community.”

In context of the above philosophy, the overall purpose of “Opportunities for All” is: “To increase the community’s capacity to open up new opportunities for all persons to exercise more control over their own lives and make a contribution to this community through volunteer work.”

Supported Volunteering Defined

Supported volunteering is about helping marginalized persons become fully engaged in volunteering. The definition of supported volunteering typically encompasses a wide variety of marginalized populations, including, for example, persons with physical or sensory disabilities, persons with learning disabilities, persons with emotional or psychiatric disabilities, new immigrants and persons of diverse cultural backgrounds. In short, any identified group of persons who may need additional consideration or assistance in becoming involved in volunteering can be encompassed by the definition. It is for this latter reason that in some supported volunteering projects, youth and seniors have also been included in the definition.

For the purposes of the “Opportunities for All” project, the definition of supported volunteering was confined to “persons with disabilities.” This definition was used because the R.G.S.V. largely included organizations that provided services to that client group, and that was where the R.G.S.V. chose to concentrate its efforts in this project. The term “disabilities” was left deliberately undefined. The R.G.S.V. decided early on that any person with a disability of any nature would be eligible

for consideration in this research project.

Supported volunteering can entail a range of activities. These include:

- helping prospective volunteer placement agencies increase their knowledge about involving persons with disabilities
- providing a coach for the volunteer, and/or
- a centralized placement agency that (1) helps not-for-profit organizations identify, or develop suitable volunteer placements for persons with disabilities, (2) aids volunteers who have disabilities to identify their interests and abilities, and (3) refers those volunteers to potential placements in not-for-profit organizations in the community.

Supported volunteering can include interventions on three levels:

- *Individual* — support for the prospective volunteer, including additional training or supervision, provision of a coach for a period of time and/or provision of a partner, either initially or on a continuing basis
- *Group* — training for agencies to enable them to be more inclusive
- *Systemic* — assistance for agencies in the development of appropriate infrastructure for management of a supported volunteering program.

The R.G.S.V. hired a consulting firm, GRAFF AND ASSOCIATES, to conduct research on supported volunteering. The research design had three key components: a literature review, a survey of the current state of supported volunteering among local not-for-profit organizations in the Waterloo Region, and focus groups with volunteers, prospective volunteers and agency representatives.

This article reports the key findings of the survey research, which revealed an unexpectedly broad prevalence of supported volunteering currently, and encouraging prospects for future growth in the involvement of volunteers having disabilities.

COMMUNITY AGENCY SURVEY

In working toward a purpose specific to the community agency survey, the R.G.S.V. identified three major issues:

- There is a lack of comprehensive, integrated strategy that promotes inclusion of all volunteers in the larger voluntary sector.
- Anecdotal and statistical evidence indicates that an increasing number of prospective volunteers require some kind of support.
- Not-for-profit organizations are becoming less able to accommodate volunteers who require support unless the support accompanies the volunteer.

Purpose

The central mandate of the R.G.S.V. was to build the community's capacity for supported volunteering service and to develop a program model to support and provide training for agencies wishing to offer volunteer opportunities. A vital element in pursuit of that mandate was a community agency survey aimed at obtaining an overview of supported volunteering currently taking place in agencies in the Waterloo Region.

Methodology

To shorten the time frame, increase ease of response, and minimize the cost of distribution, the survey was conducted by a fax-out/fax-back questionnaire method. Questions were designed to determine:

- the approximate number and proportion of organizations in the Waterloo Region that currently involve as volunteers persons who have disabilities
- the basic demographic data on those organizations
- the most common types of disabilities found in volunteers with disabilities in the Waterloo Region volunteer labor force
- whether those volunteers need support to facilitate or enable their involvement, and if so, who provides that support
- the kinds of accommodations organizations have made to enable volunteer participation

- whether agencies that during the last year involved volunteers with disabilities would consider placement of additional persons with disabilities
- whether provision of support for a volunteer by an outside person/agency would increase agencies' willingness to consider placement of additional persons with disabilities
- agencies' willingness to participate in the focus group aspect of the assets inventory.

Sample Selection

The questionnaire was sent by fax to a compilation of mailing lists of the two volunteer centres in the Waterloo Region, the membership list of the Kitchener-Waterloo Association of Volunteer Administrators, and to additional contacts in the disability-serving network and the education network supplied by R.G.S.V. representatives from the Independent Living Centre, and the Waterloo Region District School Board.

The questionnaires were faxed to 192 community agencies.

THE RESULTS

Response Rate

Ninety-two completed fax-back questionnaires were received, 89 of which are included in the following analysis of representation. This was an excellent response rate (48 percent) for this type of survey instrument. Three responses arrived too late to be included in the following analysis, reducing the effective response rate to 46 percent.

Respondents by Sector

The survey sample was distributed among a spectrum of sectors, as follows:

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| • Social Services | 31% |
| • Education | 19% |
| • Health | 18% |
| • Disability | 12% |
| • Sports & Recreation | 9% |
| • Arts & Culture | 5% |
| • Childcare | 1% |
| • Public Service | 1% |

- International Development 1%
- Employment Services 1%
- Fundraising 1%
- Seniors 1%

The profile of respondent agencies by sector closely resembled the cross section of not-for-profit agencies by sector in the larger community. (Only two anomalies surfaced. There was a higher response rate from sports and recreation organizations and a lower response rate from agencies serving seniors than might have been predicted, given their numbers on the original survey list.) This, in addition to the large response rate, inspires confidence that the survey results were reasonably valid.

Respondents by Size of Volunteer Program

Almost one-third (29 percent) of respondent agencies operated relatively small volunteer programs that involved fewer than 25 volunteers active at any given time. One-quarter (25 percent) of respondent agencies involved between 50 and 100 volunteers at a time. Another one-third (31 percent) operated large programs that had more than 100 volunteers.

THE FINDINGS

Involvement of Volunteers with Disabilities

One of the essential areas of inquiry in the community survey was to determine roughly what proportion of agencies in the Waterloo Region typically involve volunteers who have a disability. The somewhat surprising finding was that 76 (85 percent) of the responding agencies at some time during the past year involved volunteers who have a disability. This finding must be viewed with caution. However, as it cannot be assumed that the same percentage of *all* volunteer-based organizations in the survey community fit this profile. It is probable that organizations which engage in supported volunteering were more likely to respond to the questionnaire than were organizations which do not. Nevertheless, it is encouraging to find that at least 76 agencies in

the region were open to involvement of persons with disabilities in their volunteer programs during the year before the study.

Number of Volunteers with Disabilities

Respondents were asked to indicate how many persons with a disability were active as volunteers in their program in the last year. Thirty-nine (58 percent) of the 67 responding agencies had involved from one to five volunteers having some form of disability, 16 (24 percent) had involved between six and 10 such volunteers, 11 (17 percent) had involved between 11 and 50, and more than 100 volunteers with some form of disability had been active in one agency (1 percent). It is clear from the data that the majority (82 percent) of organizations in this sample involve small numbers of volunteers who have disabilities, but it should be kept in mind that 45 percent of responding agencies involved no more than 50 volunteers in total.

Types of Disability

The questionnaire asked respondents to indicate the kind of disabilities their volunteers experienced. Nine types of disabilities were listed on the questionnaire plus an "other" category. The nine types were not defined with the assumption that respondents would self-select based on their understanding of the disabilities listed.

The two most prevalent types of disability noted by respondents were developmental disability (24 percent) and mobility impairment (22 percent). The next most prevalent disability types were intellectual (10 percent), learning (10 percent), hearing (10 percent) and mental health (9 percent). Less prevalent were disabilities in dexterity, speech and visual impairment (a combined total of 12 percent). In the "other" category, accounting for 12 percent of all disabilities reported, were autism, back injury, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, lung disease, Parkinson's disease, severe allergies, and stroke recovery.

Distribution of Disability Types Among Agencies

In answer to the question whether volunteers with certain types of disabilities are clustered in specific agencies, the data revealed that volunteers with various types of disability were remarkably well distributed across a wide range of agencies. For example, 41 agencies involved one or more volunteers who had mobility impairment, and 34 agencies had volunteers with a developmental disability. This was typical of all the disabilities reported — there was a wide distribution of disability types among the respondent organizations, with the exception, of course, of those disabilities experienced by very small numbers of volunteers represented in this sample.

How Are Volunteers Recruited?

Of the 75 respondents who answered a question about recruitment of volunteers with disabilities, 80 percent reported they did not actively recruit persons who have a disability, while 20 percent said they did actively recruit persons who have a disability. This research indicates that, for this sample at least, supported volunteering is not deliberately created or sustained, and one is led to speculate how many more volunteers with disabilities might become involved if placement agencies engaged in active outreach and affirmative action efforts.

Do Volunteers Receive Needed Support?

Responses to the question, "Have any of the persons with disabilities that have volunteered with you needed to have someone working with them to provide support to them while they volunteered?," indicated that one-third of all volunteers with a disability needed no additional support to conduct their volunteer work. Two-thirds of the active volunteers with disabilities did require someone to provide support while they volunteered.

The source of support varied. In 45 percent of the instances, support was provided by the agency in which the volunteer

was involved. Support was provided by another agency in 40 percent of the cases. In 15 percent of the cases, support was given by volunteers' parents, persons engaged by volunteers themselves, or by an insurance company.

Have Special Accommodations Been Necessary?

Considered to be an important discovery in this research, a small majority of responding agencies (52 percent) stated that no special accommodations were required in order to involve successfully those volunteers with a disability. The remainder (48 percent) had to make some form of accommodation.

Respondents listed a wide range of types of accommodations. The two accommodations most frequently cited were "modify or limit demands of position and/or carefully select a position that supplies appropriate demands," and "allocate additional staff supervision to support volunteer(s)." A number of modifications were required for volunteers using a wheelchair, for example, provision of special chairs, installing opening devices on doors, provision of a ramp, and renovation of a washroom.

Other accommodations mentioned in the responses included:

- rearrangement of furniture and equipment
- provision of transportation assistance or costs
- extra training
- permission for volunteer to work alone if preferred
- provision of counseling on life issues
- assignment of another volunteer for support
- alteration of seating arrangements to facilitate hearing
- provision of a larger [monitor] screen and larger print
- modification of work hours
- extra clarification of work assignments
- special patience
- telephone head set
- material on tape

Openness to Future Involvement of Volunteers

Sample agencies were asked if they would consider future placement of additional volunteers with disabilities. The vast majority of respondents (92 percent) said they would. Consideration was not significantly stronger if additional support were promised. The most common caveat was "if suitable positions are available and the matching process of volunteer to placement needs meets normally careful standards."

Interestingly, of the 8 percent of organizations that said they would not take additional volunteers who have disabilities, some already involve volunteers who have disabilities, but are at their limit. Remarkably, only 2 percent of the entire sample appeared to be unwilling under any circumstance to consider the involvement of persons who have disabilities as volunteers in their programs. Clearly, there is great potential for expansion in supported volunteering among the sample agencies.

Concluding Observations

- A cross section of the 197 not-for-profit agencies responded to the survey.
- The response rate was excellent.
- Supported volunteering is widely existent in the Waterloo Region.
- There is a broad range in kinds of disabilities represented among the volunteers reported in the sample.
- The various disabilities were evenly dispersed across agencies; there was no "pocketing" or "clustering."
- Involvement of supported volunteers was not a deliberate aspect of volunteer programs. It appears that if persons with a disability find their way to a placement agency, organizations can integrate them. Agencies have not, however, made deliberate attempts to be inclusive or to reach out to this valuable labor pool.
- The survey data does not speak to the experience of prospective volunteers, for example, what efforts have been

required by them to locate suitable placements, or what proportion of them might seek but never find volunteer work in their community.

- Involving persons with disabilities as volunteers does not necessarily have to be costly. In over one-half of the cases reported, no special accommodations were necessary. This is an important finding at a time when many managers of volunteer programs are pressured to involve more volunteers, with fewer resources available to do so.
- There is great potential in agencies' willingness to consider future placements, and there was no indication of need for significant additional supports to volunteers.
- Three important questions stand out: (1) What does the experience of supported volunteers look like from the perspective of the volunteers themselves? (2) Since more prospective individuals who have a disability are coming forward to seek volunteer involvement, what would it take to encourage organizations to actually involve the additional volunteers they said they would be willing to place? (3) How many other agencies that did not respond might be encouraged to become involved in supported volunteerism?
- Though there was no available baseline for comparison, some data was surprising: the high percentage of agencies that responded; the even distribution of disability types across responding agencies; and the extent of openness to future involvement of persons with disabilities.

While the survey data is interesting in absolute terms, it would have greater value if it could be compared to data collected in other locations using the same survey design. The R.G.S.V. encourages other communities to replicate the survey and will offer every possible form of cooperation to those that are interested in doing so.

GETTING STARTED

Community groups or persons wishing to look into the possibility of creating a supported volunteer project might start by consulting a volunteer centre if one exists in their local community. Volunteer centres are mandated to assist citizens in finding appropriate and satisfying volunteer placements. If there is no volunteer centre or similar organization, it might be possible to locate a nearby organization that already provides opportunities for supported volunteers. The search might well begin by contacting disability-service agencies to see whether they know of the existence of supported volunteering anywhere in the community, or if not, whether they would be interested in initiating a project.

The project described in this article was probably unique because agencies which serve people with disabilities initiated the project (in cooperation with their local volunteer centres). They did so because a client who had a disability sought, but could not find, volunteer work in her local community. The parents of the client advocated with the disability-service agency with which their daughter was connected. The agency recognized that volunteering could be helpful to the client, and that assistance and encouragement to enable her to volunteer would be consistent with their existing services.

Promoting involvement in volunteer work is a natural "fit" with other services provided by disability-service organizations that often help clients develop job and social skills, make contacts and demonstrate abilities, build confidence and self-esteem, and in general, help clients integrate more fully into mainstream community life. There is ample demonstration that these same benefits flow regularly to volunteers from their volunteer work. The founding agency in the "Opportunities for All" project soon discovered that other disability-service agencies were also interested in the concept of making volunteering more accessible, and from there the project took shape.

This kind of consciousness about the usefulness of volunteering to persons with disabilities and for other marginalized or "disadvantaged" populations is not widespread among organizations in the disability-service community. While the benefits received by volunteers are well-known within the circle of volunteerism-promoting agencies, that is not the case in the wider circle of community and human service agencies. An important first step in the initiation of supported volunteering, therefore, is the cultivation of such consciousness.

For more information about the study, or the Resource Group for Supported Volunteering, contact: Diane Boston-Nyp, "Opportunities for All Project," Independent Living Centre, 3400 King Street East, Kitchener ON W2A 4B2, Canada.

ENDNOTE

¹Formally known as The Regional Municipality of Waterloo, The Waterloo Region, located 100 kilometers west of Toronto, comprises the cities of Waterloo, Kitchener and Cambridge, plus several towns and rural areas. The population of the region in 1998 was 418,000, representing 155,590 households.