

## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the role of peer management for youth volunteers at the Canadian Red Cross. Using data from a sample of 269 youth volunteers in this program, we analyze the role of peer management. The research shows that peer management of youth volunteers is successful in dealing with retention, recruitment and other volunteer management issues. Furthermore, the highly positive experiences of youth involved in this program resulted in a commitment to the organization and to volunteering in general. The findings reveal that the volunteer experience of youth in this program addresses some of the key reasons for which youth engage in volunteer activities.*

# A Study of Peer Management of Youth Volunteers at the Canadian Red Cross

Femida Handy and Kirsten Keil

## INTRODUCTION

Volunteers of all ages are recruited by nonprofit organizations. In Canada, youth volunteers, 14 to 24 years old, account for 18% of all persons volunteering and 15% of all hours volunteered. More than one in three persons age 15 to 24 years old volunteered for a charitable or nonprofit organization in 1997, nearly double the rate of youth volunteers in 1987 (Hall et al, 1998)<sup>1</sup>.

Recruiting and managing volunteers, including youth volunteers, is an ongoing and crucial issue for nonprofit organizations. There exists a large body of literature with related resources aimed at volunteer administrators; new approaches to volunteer management are surfacing and are replicated across the sector (Fisher and Cole, 1993; Cnaan and Cascio, 1996, Safrit and Merrill, 1998).<sup>2</sup>

One relatively recent approach to volunteer management is peer management. In peer management, individual volunteers within a volunteer program manage their peers, requiring them to take on some elements of the volunteer administrator's role. Although there exist several studies related to youth volunteers (Fitch, 1987; Furco, 1994; Harrison, 1987; Newmann & Rutter, 1986; Raskoff & Sundeen, 1998; Sundeen & Raskoff, 1994, 1995, 2000; Serow, 1989; Serow & Dreyden, 1990), little is written on the management of youth volunteers by their peers.

This paper explores the issues of peer management of youth volunteers, a program that was recently instituted at the Metropolitan Toronto branch of the Canadian Red Cross. We examine how this peer management pro-

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gram attempted to respond to the goals of the Red Cross, which included:

- Providing a positive volunteering experience for the youth
- Enhancing skills among youth volunteers, retaining volunteers
- Fostering a commitment to the organization
- Reducing the overall burden on volunteer administrators (Canadian Red Cross, 1999; Goliss, 1999).

We surveyed all youth volunteers who had participated in the peer management program in the Red Cross at any time since its inception in June 1996 until August 1998 to determine their attitudes toward peer management and motivations for volunteering. We examined the responses of those youth who served as peer managers to ascertain the benefits and challenges that arose in managing their peers. Finally, to establish the value of the program for the organization, we interviewed staff involved in some aspect of managing the summer program involving the youth or in managing the Red Cross programs using youth volunteers.

#### PEER MANAGEMENT OF VOLUNTEERS IN THE CANADIAN RED CROSS

The Summer Student Volunteer Program (SSV Program) at the Metropolitan Toronto branch of the Canadian Red Cross provided youth in the Toronto area with volunteer opportunities during the months of July and August. This program recruited approximately 500 youth per year, students between the ages of 14 and 25, and gave them volunteer placements within the many programs run or sponsored by the Red Cross.<sup>3</sup> The intake of a large number of youth volunteers for a relatively short duration of time required careful and strategic management to avoid problems of managing, motivating and retaining individuals. These needs exceeded the management resources that existed at the Red Cross prior to June 1996. In response to this situa-

tion, the Toronto Red Cross developed a peer management program within the SSV Program called the Leadership Program.

It was hoped that the development of the Leadership Program would ease managerial pressures, develop leadership skills in youth volunteers, provide a positive volunteering experience and foster commitment to the organization and volunteering in general. Approximately 50 youth were selected each year and designated as peer managers, called Leaders in this program. Leaders were chosen by the SSV program recruiters. This was not a highly structured process. Interviewers were given initial training on how to recruit leaders among the applicants, based on leadership qualities gleaned through their references or previous leadership experience at school or elsewhere. Youth were chosen based on personality traits and how they conducted themselves during the interview.

Although approximately 50 Leaders were selected in any given year, the actual number of Leaders depended on the needs indicated by the program coordinators. Each year program coordinators made requests for summer student volunteers, and one Leader was designated for approximately every 10 volunteers.

Leaders attended training workshops and were assigned certain managerial responsibilities. One SSV staff member, specifically hired for the summer, was designated to train the Leaders in the summer program. The training included problem solving, managing time and stress, team building, motivating, resolving conflict, communicating effectively and dealing with difficult situations. The role of the Leaders was essentially an extension of the staff role, and Leaders' responsibilities included training, supervision, on-going support and guidance of their peers. They also scheduled shifts, liaised with staff, resolved conflicts, motivated volunteers and provided volunteer recognition. The SSV trainer was also responsible for the overall supervision of the Leaders. However, when the Leaders were working in specific programs, the year-round program coordinator was their on-site supervisor.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

We surveyed all youth who had taken part in the SSV Program since its inception in June 1996 through August 1998. A five-page questionnaire was mailed to 912 volunteers who had participated in the program during those years. The survey was intended to produce a profile of the volunteer population in the SSV Program during this time period and to generate data on the volunteers' motivations and attitudes, volunteer retention and responses to peer management. Personal interviews with Red Cross staff were used for data on the effects of the program on their workload, and to estimate their receptiveness to the program as well as the benefits and drawbacks of the program.

Of the 912 questionnaires, 818 questionnaires were successfully delivered and 269 completed questionnaires returned—a 33% return rate. The seven personal interviews with the staff lasted between one to two hours each, and follow-up phone calls were made to complete the data collection.

The sample group consisted of 269 respondents, ranging from 14 to 24 years of age, with an average and median age of 19 years. All of the respondents were students at schools or universities, and approximately 73% of the total sample was female. Over 80% of the respondents came from middle or higher income households, which reflects existing studies that suggest the majority of student volunteers generally come from middle class and upper-middle class backgrounds (Hall et al, 1998; Sundeen, 1990; Sundeen & Raskoff, 1994).

## RESULTS

The average number of hours respondents had volunteered at the Red Cross in the past 12 months was 9.07 hours per week for a period of 2.34 months, or 1.75 hours per week per year. This is a relatively low figure, compared to the 3.2 hours average for youth volunteers in Ontario (NVS GP, 2000). However, the number of hours may be due to the

limited nature of the survey. Respondents reported only the hours volunteered at the Red Cross and did not include time spent volunteering for other organizations. Furthermore, the respondents were summer student volunteers, usually engaged in the Red Cross program only for the months of July and August.

Our sample had an over representation of women (females 73%, males 27%) as compared to all volunteers in Canada in 1997 (54% female; 46% male). However, we found this trend reversed in our sample for Leaders—29% of all male volunteers were Leaders, whereas only 19% of all female volunteers were Leaders. This may be a factor of recruitment of the volunteers in general or the selection process used by staff for Leaders as described earlier. Recruitment for student volunteers was done at schools, and students had to fill out application forms. SSV recruiters were trained to screen out unsuitable candidates. For example, a student enrolled in summer school or taking a month-long vacation was considered unsuitable due to the time requirements of the program. There were no gender specific guidelines given to the recruiters in either selecting volunteers or Leaders.

The survey indicated that 35.7% of the respondents volunteered with the Red Cross SSV Program for more than one summer, most of whom (81%) had volunteered for two summers, and 19% for three summers. Of the total number of respondents (N = 269), 86.6% indicated that they would return to volunteer at the Red Cross. Of the number of respondents who were already returning volunteers (N = 96), 92.7% indicated they would return again. This shows a substantial improvement over the 20% retention rate the Red Cross experienced with youth volunteers before implementing the peer management program.

We asked those who had returned to the program to indicate the top reasons why they had returned. The four most common

responses were: "I enjoyed the experience and wanted to return," 36.4%; "I wanted to become a Leader," 19.4%; "I was asked to return," 15.8% and "I had created a circle of friends in the program," 15.0%.

A positive correlation was found between the chance to network and socialize and the number of summers that a volunteer chose to return. This suggested that providing volunteers opportunities to socialize and network with their peers might increase retention rates. The peer management program increased the interaction of volunteers with their peers significantly. Since Leaders took on many responsibilities of managing their peers, it was inevitable that they would interact with each other more often. For example, scheduling volunteers and resolving conflicts required frequent interaction between the youth volunteers and their peer Leader. These interactions had previously been between an adult manager and youth volunteers. Furthermore, with peer management, volunteers might not find it intimidating to reach out to their peers, as compared to an adult, for support or in resolving any problems or bringing up new ideas (Trela & Conley, 1997; Ackerman & Boccia, 1997; and Sturkie and Hansen, 1992).

A significant majority of the respondents (62.5%) showed an interest in becoming a Leader, which is meaningful in the context of retention rates. Over 71% of respondents stated they would like to become a Red Cross adult volunteer, and nearly 58% indicated they would like to be employed by the Red Cross in the future. These findings indicate that the volunteers seemed highly committed to the Red Cross in terms of future involvement and that a positive experience in the peer management program was a significant indicator for retention rates.

While all the volunteers donated time to the Red Cross, 13% also donated money to the Red Cross with the average donation being \$37.40. Twenty percent participated by donating in the Red Bank fundraising pro-

gram. Of those that did not donate, 72% said that they would donate in the future. Over a third of the volunteers (34.2%) donated blood to the Red Cross. It is likely recruitment and fundraising strategies targeted to student volunteers may prove particularly successful.

## LEADERS

Over 86% of the Leaders stated that they found the volunteers receptive to peer management. For those respondents (164) who had experienced supervision by Leader management, 80% felt that they were well supervised by their SSV Leader, and 90% indicated that they had enjoyed the experience. Approximately 11% of those who said they enjoyed the experience did not feel that they were well supervised by the peer managers.

Leaders were also asked to indicate reasons for participating in the SSV Leadership Program. Over 40% said they participated because they were asked to do so at the initial interview. Other reasons given were: "learned about it during regular volunteering at the Red Cross," 24.4%; a friend recommended it," 14.4% and "participated in previous years," 12.2%.

Over a third (36%) of the 96 youth who returned to the SSV program indicated they returned because they wanted to become Leaders, the most frequently cited reason for returning to the Red Cross. The leadership position was attractive to student volunteers and could be used in recruitment and retention strategies.

Of the 96 respondents who had returned after their first summer in the SSV Program, 35.4% of them were Leaders at least once in their volunteering experience with the Red Cross. Considering that Leaders usually represent approximately 10% of all the volunteers, this indicates (although not conclusively) a relatively high level of satisfaction, and a return rate of nearly 60% of the Leaders. The Leader volunteers had a significantly higher return rate than other volunteers in this program.

## STAFF

We interviewed seven staff members involved in the program, either in coordinating the programs that utilized youth volunteers, supervising Leaders or managing the SSV program. For example, we interviewed the Manager of Employee and Volunteer Resources who was responsible for the SSV program, program coordinators, a training coordinator and a recruiter. During these unstructured interviews, staff were encouraged to share their assessment of the program. They were fairly unanimous in stating that the peer management program had been well received by staff and volunteers. They indicated that the youth had positive experiences being managed by Leaders. Peer leaders were found to be responsible and were a "godsend" in that they reduced the time and energy required by staff in dealing with volunteers.

All staff expressed an unanticipated and important benefit of the program—the Leaders injected enthusiasm and spirit in the volunteer program. Staff observed that the Leaders felt empowered and quickly took ownership and pride in managing their volunteer group. Leaders often approached their staff with ideas on how to improve the program and be more responsive to the needs of the clients and volunteers.

Some staff remarked that some returning peer Leaders had to be reminded that they were participating in a peer program. Occasionally Leaders did not relate to the volunteers as peers, instead seeing themselves as a privileged group with authority similar to the staff. This attitude was detrimental to the spirit of peer management, so staff intervened to restore the "peer" into the management style. SSV Trainers were made aware of this problem by other Leaders or volunteers or by observation during training workshops<sup>4</sup>. The SSV trainer addressed the issue during a private meeting with the Leader in question.

Only one staff member felt the quality of student volunteer management sometimes suffered because Leaders occasionally lacked

maturity in seeking solutions to problems that arose.

## CONCLUSION

Without exception, the staff rated the SSV program a success in terms of alleviating the time and energy burden on staff. Having peer managers help with management tasks was particularly useful in coping with a large intake of volunteers at one time for a short period of service. Furthermore, the program provided tangible benefits in terms of a significant increase in retention of volunteers.

The costs involved in running the program were \$5,000 to \$8,000 for the summer, including administrative expenses and incidental expenses such as travel, recognition, supplies and photocopies. The cost of hiring additional summer staff for training and recruiting Leaders was not included. The Manager of Employee and Volunteer Resources along with the directors responsible for approving the budget and resources for the program felt the value of the program far outweighed the costs. Without peer leaders, more staff would have been needed for supervision and management.

The Red Cross wanted to provide positive volunteer experiences, encourage volunteer retention and promote a sense of community and commitment. In light of our findings, we believe all of these goals were achieved.

Volunteers who were supervised by their peers expressed very high levels of satisfaction. Leaders also reported high levels of satisfaction and found their experience as managers to be very valuable. Many volunteers wished to return as peer managers. Youth who served as Leaders gained news skills and enhanced their résumés for gaining entrance to university programs and in seeking employment.

In addition, survey respondents showed high levels of commitment to the organization. They indicated an interest in volunteering or being employed with the Red Cross when they became adults. The student volunteers donated money to the Red Cross and occasionally were blood donors.

The findings outlined here have important implications for people who study volunteerism and those who work directly with volunteers. Peer management among youth volunteers was successful on all counts and showed potential benefits for volunteer administrators, staff, peer managers and youth volunteers. The primary benefits were increased retention rates, positive volunteer experiences and a sense of community and commitment among the volunteers.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>In the United States, nearly three out of five teenagers volunteered for an average of 3.5 hours per week (America's teenage volunteers, 2000)

<sup>2</sup>The literature acknowledges that successful volunteer management techniques are often shared among practitioners. An example of this is the Canadian Blood Services' creation of a volunteer program which replicated a Canadian Red Cross program.

<sup>3</sup>These include: Meals on Wheels, Wheelchair Escort Services, Water Safety Education, Bicycle Safety Education, Seniors Program, City Kids Program, Home Healthcare, First Aid, Global Education, Blood Clinic Services (this program was discontinued in 1999) and fundraising campaigns.

<sup>4</sup>This problem surfaced infrequently and had not been brought up in a proactive manner.

## APPENDIX

### Structure of the Summer Student Volunteer Program

To plan for the Summer Student Volunteer Program, the Coordinator of Volunteer Resources at the Canadian Red Cross put out an internal call among the various Red Cross programs to elicit their needs for volunteers and Leaders for the summer months. Recruitment for Leaders and assigning them to particular programs was done through interviews of applicants for the SSV program. The Red Cross hired recruiters to interview all students applying to the program and designate them to appropriate programs.

The recruiter also chose Leaders from the applicants and matched them to programs requiring Leaders. Students' interests and skills drove this matching process. As a general rule, one Leader was assigned to manage every 10 student volunteers. The recruiters worked with student volunteers in the SSV program throughout the summer dealing with program needs, planning social events, tracking volunteer hours and generating a database of volunteer hours (collected from Leaders), reference letters and certificates of recognition.

The Red Cross also hired a trainer to prepare the Leaders prior to the start of the SSV program and then to manage and supervise the group of Leaders during the program. They provided leadership workshops and other support and guidance over the summer.

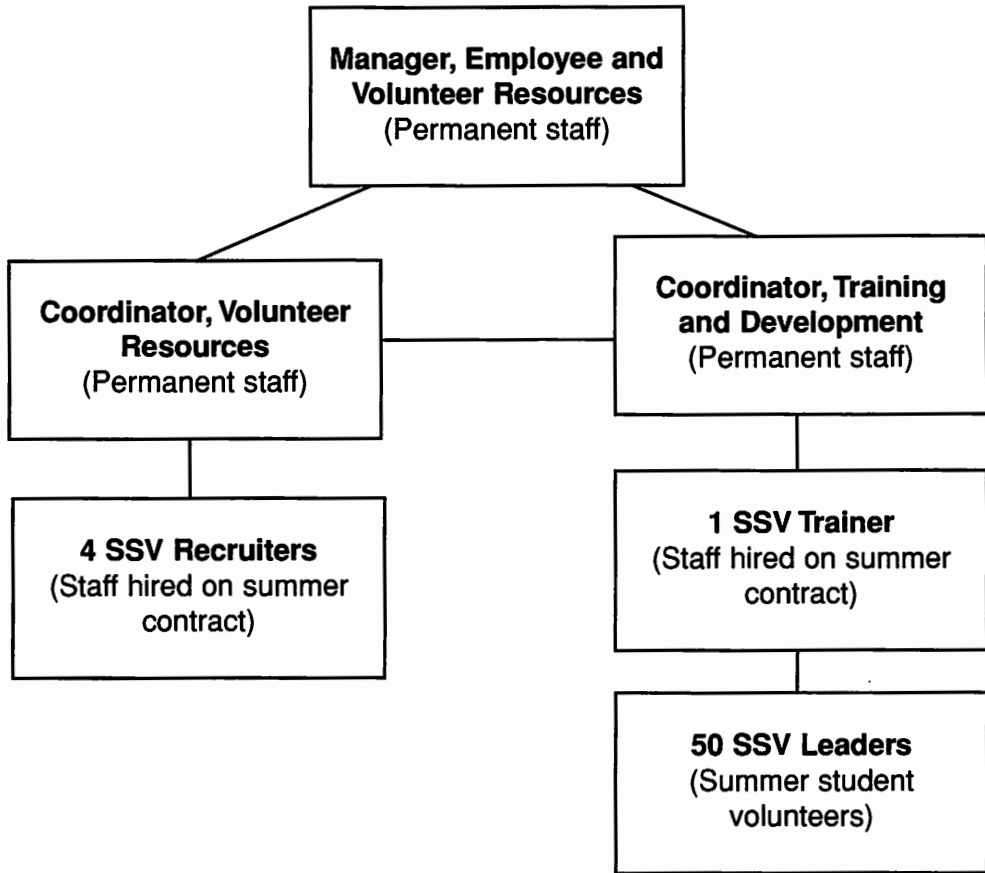
Leaders initially helped with the training of incoming student volunteers and ensured that the program had a successful start. To facilitate this, Leaders attended a daylong workshop where they were trained in all administrative aspects of the program, including the mandates of the programs offered by the Red Cross, tracking and recording volunteer hours, scheduling volunteers and their relation to the staff and volunteers. The trainer taught leadership skills throughout the summer, including effective communication, problem solving, team building, conflict resolution and motivation. The workshops also gave Leaders a forum to share their experiences and receive feedback on their work.

Supervision of the Leaders is done at two levels. The trainer supervises them in a general administrative context, while the program coordinators supervise them at the program, on-site level. Red Cross programs are situated throughout the city. The program coordinator works with the Leaders at the start of the summer to train the student volunteers, after which the Leaders assume responsibility for supervising the volunteers, their peers.

The permanent staff at the Red Cross who have responsibility for the SSV program are: the Manager of Employee and Volunteer Resources, the Coordinator of Volunteer Resources, and the Coordinator of Training and Development. They hire, train and supervise the SSV recruiters and trainer. The chart on page 29 shows the organizational structure and management of the SSV program.



## Organizational Structure of SSV Program



## SSV Leaders Assigned to Programs (Approximately 25)

