

ABSTRACT

Some volunteer programs are based in organizations where employees are represented by unions. This most frequently occurs in governmental organizations and agencies. This survey reviews what is known about the level of volunteering for government, its value, and the types of co-production performed by volunteers. Four union contracts are analyzed to determine strategies to help volunteer managers build more effective relationships with employee unions. Specific steps are outlined to assist volunteer managers develop policies and procedures to ensure the success of their programs.

Solving the Hazards of Unions and Volunteer Relations in Government Organizations

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A city in Texas has a municipal volunteer program. The volunteers' handbook opens with welcoming letters from the mayor and the city manager. The city manager says the city "is well known for its quality of life and excellent municipal services. This reputation can be directly attributed to citizen involvement by volunteers" (Plano City Government, 1996). This sentiment is designed to reassure volunteers of their value. If read by the city's public sector employees, the interpretation might be different. Managers or coordinators of volunteers, when working for their government organizations, agencies, departments, and divisions must develop strategies to work effectively with public sector employees. The complexity of the situation is increased when the employees are represented by a union.

HOW MANY VOLUNTEERS ARE THERE IN GOVERNMENT?

Each year 23 million people volunteer for federal, state, city, or county government (Brudney, 1990b). More than half (56.5%) of U.S. cities with populations of more than 4,500 involve volunteers in the delivery of at least one service (Brudney, 1990b). In a survey of county governments, 20% reported involving more than 500 volunteers on an annual basis (Lane and Shultz, 1997). A 1990 study of volun-

teers in Washington state reported 50,000 people volunteered for 60 state agencies (Winans, 1991). According to data compiled by Peter Lane and Cynthia Schultz for the National Association of Counties, published in the winter 1997 issue of *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, there was a significant increase in volunteers in city and county government in the mid-to-late 1980s. A 1985 study by Duncombe of 736 cities with populations of more than 2,500 reported that 77.8% of cities in the Northeast states had volunteer involvement, 62.8% in the North Central states, 72.6% in the Southern states, and 79.5% in the West (1985).

A 1997 study on government volunteer programs for The Points of Light Foundation revealed a substantial amount of volunteer activity in government programs: the Internal Revenue Service has 80,000 volunteers working in conjunction with taxpayer education centers around the United States; the US Army Corps of Engineers has more than 300 staff who manage volunteers at sites throughout the country; the National Association of Partners for Education maintains a list of more than 700 volunteer coordinators in public and private schools (Macduff, 1997).

Is all this activity new? Hardly. "For more than 300 years, Americans have

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relied on volunteers for essential but unpaid tasks" (Duncombe, 1985). In colonial times volunteers served as night watchmen, firemen, and in the militia. Churches relied heavily on volunteers. During the 1800s volunteers founded and staffed organizations to give aid to the poor and homeless. New citizens usually were helped by volunteers (Duncombe, 1985).

What has changed is that government has taken over many of these essential services. Paid employees are sometimes unaccustomed to working with unpaid people to provide services to communities. And government employees usually are represented by unions whose mandate is to keep their members employed.

CO-PRODUCTION: HOW DO CITIZENS VOLUNTEER?

The activity of volunteers in partnership with their government is referred to as co-production. Co-production is broadly defined as citizen participation in all aspects of the public service delivery process (Ferris, 1988). It can include the development of policies via service on advisory groups or panels or it can be direct involvement in service, such as litter patrols.

The range of services provided by volunteers is demonstrated by the responses to the survey by the National Association of Counties. Of the counties responding to the survey, 25% reported involving volunteers. The tasks of the volunteers included, but were not limited to: fire-fighters or emergency medical services (72%); services to seniors (63%); libraries (50%); parks and recreation (49%); youth services (48%); social services (42%); education (42%); environmental and recycling services and sheriffs' offices or corrections departments (40%); community and economic development (37%); public safety (34%); public health (33%); transportation (25%). Fewer than 20% volunteered in the areas of housing, judicial and legal affairs, finance, and public utilities (Lane and Shultz, 1997).

Studies in 1988 and 1993 by the International City/County Management Association reported the same diversity of service by volunteers in city and county government (Moulder, 1994). In addition, most cities have volunteer boards and commissions to deal with aspects of local policy making, planning, zoning, parks, and the like (Baker, 1994).

Brudney maintains that volunteers are no longer a hidden resource of government (1990a). Government organizations have grown dependent on volunteers. The head of the Smithsonian Institution (a collection of scientific and cultural institutes created by a 1846 act of Congress) in Washington, DC, said that the dependence on volunteers in the many museums for which he is responsible cannot be overstated (Brudney 1990b). These volunteers often hold front-line positions with high levels of client contact. Sometimes they are in positions that require discretion in the provision of publicly funded services. The range of tasks for government-based volunteers is only limited by the ingenuity of officials and the acceptance of volunteers by employees, many of whom are represented by a union.

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEERS IN GOVERNMENT?

What is the dollar value of all this volunteering? The city of Plano, Texas, estimates that volunteers contributed close to \$2.5 million worth of service between 1982 and 1995 (Popik, 1997). In a survey of U.S. counties, the results indicate that counties with a central volunteer coordinating office received three times the dollar value of service from volunteers than counties without one (Lane and Shultz, 1997).

It is easy to add up the contribution of volunteers in dollars, but there are less tangible contributions. Volunteers can build empathetic relationships with clients, provide fresh perspectives for assessing practices and procedures, enhance the responsiveness of government, or serve as advocates for the agency or organization (Brudney, 1990b).

COORDINATION OF VOLUNTEERS IN GOVERNMENT

Coordination of volunteers in government agencies is rarely performed by a full-time, centralized volunteer office, but rather is handled on a department or program basis (Lane and Shultz, 1997). In the National Association of Counties' study of counties that involved volunteers, only 6% reported some type of central coordinating office for volunteers (Lane and Shultz, 1997). The Points of Light study of government volunteer coordinators revealed few places where volunteer management or coordination was the full-time duty of a single employee. Usually the employee had other duties, of which volunteer coordination was only one part (Macduff, 1997).

UNIONS, EMPLOYEES, AND VOLUNTEERS: THE HAZARDS

A hazard of co-production is the potential resistance of public employees to volunteers because employee job security is threatened (Ferris, 1988). This is no more evident than in a 1994 article on volunteers in local government service delivery. The author says, "volunteers are often used to compensate for reductions in personnel by being assigned responsibilities usually handled by paid employees" (Moulder, 1994).

Sundeen reviewed a number of late 1980s research reports on government volunteers and makes the point that much more research is needed on the role relationship between volunteers and paid government employees because employees are not accustomed to dealing with volunteers (Sundeen, 1990). One cause of the tension between volunteers and public sector employees could be a lack of knowledge on both sides. Sundeen asserts that there is little known about such things as the costs and/or benefits of volunteers, the role relationship between unpaid citizens and employees in public agencies, and the influence of volunteers on public policy (Sundeen, 1990). In a list-serve posting on the Internet, the manager

of a state government volunteer program, Chris Dinnan, referred to the "potential dysfunctional tension" that can exist between staff and volunteers when they attempt to work together to co-produce public service. Dinnan asserts that a volunteer program cannot be effective in a climate of suspicion or hostility (1997).

Not only are public employees worried about jobs, but they also are concerned about a possible decline in the quality of service, the protection of confidentiality, training of volunteers, reliability, and liability issues (Dinnan, 1997; Montjoy and Brudney, 1991). In addition, they recognize that staff working with volunteers must devote time to supervision when it is rarely in their job description (Montjoy and Brudney, 1991).

UNION CONTRACTS AND VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

In the literature search for this article, there were only two studies that addressed the issue of union reaction to the establishment of a volunteer program. Their comments on employee, union, and volunteer program relations were minimal. In visits to 40 cities for a 1986 study, Duncombe found four cities with strong resistance to volunteers. In one, the city administrator involved volunteers at the municipal senior center. He reported that expansion to other departments was out of the question due to union opposition. In another city, the unionized firefighters resisted the introduction of volunteer firefighters because they assumed paid positions would be eliminated (Duncombe, 1986). One sure way to lose the support of employees is to aggressively recruit volunteers during a time of downsizing, reductions-in-force (RIF), or layoffs (Duncombe, 1986).

If public employees are well organized by their union and perceive volunteers as replacements for jobs they hold, then it is unlikely there will be a reliance on volunteers (Ferris, 1988). Conversely, if the employees see volunteers as supplementing rather than replacing them, it is likely

a healthy volunteer program can exist.

It is interesting to note, however, in a study by Ferris of city and county governments with volunteer programs that unionization had no influence on the decision to involve citizens in the co-production of services (Ferris, 1988). He notes that this finding is in opposition to other research that suggests that volunteer involvement is negatively impacted by the presence of unions. As Sundeen points out, this is an area ripe for research.

To determine how unions view their relationship with volunteer programs, the author obtained four union contracts from the Association of Federal, State, and Municipal Employees. One was for a bargaining unit in a large Eastern city; another was for a large suburban city in the western United States; a third was for a library; and the fourth was unidentifiable.

The purpose of analyzing the contracts was to identify the bargaining unit conditions relevant to the volunteer program. A bargaining unit is a group of employees represented by a union. For example, a city might have different bargaining units representing employees in public safety, utilities, or clerical. Not all the contracts revealed the exact location of the bargaining unit. By using the conditions in the union contracts, strategies could be developed for volunteer managers/coordinators to work more effectively with unions. The analysis revealed three conditions that appeared in all four union contracts. Several conditions were found in some of the contracts, but not in all. There is no "one size fits all" union contract on the issue of volunteers.

The three conditions that appeared in all four contracts were the issues of supplanting (replacing a paid position with a volunteer position), task listings, and expansion of tasks for volunteers (new tasks). Unions want to protect the jobs held by their members by being made aware of the tasks assigned to volunteers and they want to be notified when there is an expansion of those tasks.

Other conditions that appeared in at

least one or more of the four contracts included having professional coordination of volunteers; no layoffs as a result of volunteer involvement; department heads controlling volunteer involvement; monthly reports to the union on volunteer involvement; providing information to volunteers about the union; and a formal grievance procedure if an employee wishes to challenge the involvement of volunteers.

There are many suggestions to minimize the potential hazards of union employee and volunteer interactions. Duncombe suggests that the volunteer should be characterized as "extra help and assistance." He cites the example of a city administrator who appointed a labor/management committee to address the issue of volunteers that resulted in union backing for volunteer involvement (Duncombe, 1986). Montjoy and Brudney urge management and administration to acknowledge the time-consuming nature of scheduling and coordination of volunteers (1991). Dinnan, who manages volunteers in a state government program, says that employees need to shift their focus "for providing service *for* the public to providing services *with* the public" (1997).

RESULTS

This survey of government volunteer programs and analysis of union contract conditions suggested a number of strategies to build positive relationships with unions and their public sector employees.

- Work with the union to create a statement of benefits accruing from a volunteer program. One union contract begins its section on volunteering with a preamble outlining the value of volunteers to the government entity, the bargaining unit, and the public sector employees: "The City and the Union agree that volunteer programs can be mutually beneficial to the City employees and the citizens of _____. The parties recognize that volunteer programs provide a sense of community involvement and require a com-

mitment of time and service on behalf of the volunteers. To that end, the City is committed to working in partnership with the Union to build successful volunteer programs" (AFSME, 1997). Statements such as this should be widely disseminated in informational material for volunteers and paid staff.

- Volunteer programs need coordination. Two of the four union contracts cited in this article specifically addressed the issue and stated its importance to the health of the overall public service program. Coordinating volunteers, especially when they serve in far-flung departments or offices, requires full-time attention. This attention also provides for consistency in recruiting, screening, recognition, and evaluation from work unit to work unit.

- Turn those volunteer position descriptions into "task assignments." Employees have "jobs" or "positions." Unions are more likely to understand the supplemental nature of volunteer work if it is called "tasks," rather than jobs or positions.

- Volunteer tasks need to be specific and limited. The work to be accomplished must be clearly spelled out to demonstrate that it does not supplant the work of a paid employee.

- The work of volunteers supplements the work of the public sector employee. Volunteers are teammates helping paid staff accomplish objectives.

- Staff who supervise volunteers determine the need for them. Volunteer task request forms for supervisors are an effective means to achieve involvement by employees. The supervisor is the one who makes the final decision on volunteer placement.

- Orientation and training of volunteers provides information on the union and the bargaining unit. Volunteers should know who the union representatives are. Two of the four union contracts cited in this survey specified this item.

- Expansion of the volunteer program requires consultation with the union. Supplanting can be avoided and positive communication fostered by involving the

union as plans go forward to expand volunteer programs. Union and volunteer program communication is designed to set broad parameters, not require the approval of small changes.

- Creating new volunteer tasks requires that employees be promptly notified. Employee newsletters need information on the work of the volunteers. When there are no employee newsletters, announcements about volunteer involvement can be made at the appropriate staff meetings.

- Volunteer work in no way influences overtime opportunities for unionized employees.

- No aspect of the volunteer program should ever take precedence over the bargaining unit. One government-based volunteer coordinator reported that the union viewed her program as antithetical to the bargaining unit as a whole and not just individual employees. She has designed her entire program to avoid confrontation with the union. Her advice is to be sure that no part of the program threatens employee jobs or the bargaining unit's viability.

- Frequent and consistent communication occurs between union representatives and the volunteer manager.

- An advisory committee, formed with the support of the union and management, works with the volunteer program manager to carry out the terms of the union contract (as it relates to volunteers), develops the existing volunteer program, plans for expansion (as needed), and recommends policies and procedures for it.

- A written procedure for settling disputes between volunteers and union members or employees is needed. There should be an official way in which a grievance can be filed by an employee who feels a volunteer is doing the work of paid staff. Both volunteers and public sector employees need to know the policy exists.

CONCLUSIONS

It is essential to understand the role of the union in relationship to the volunteer

program. Begin with a review of the bargaining unit contract and administrative rules. Make a checklist of the requirements of the union contract or management's administrative policies and determine if the volunteer program meets current requirements. It might be time to propose additional conditions to the union contract.

Seek out a local college or university (departments of public administration or sociology) to conduct research to determine the current attitudes between volunteers and union employees in your organization. Including union representation in the research might be helpful. Determine if there is a problem before attempting to fix something that doesn't need fixing.

As mentioned before, Dinnan suggests a new way of thinking where union employees not only provide service for the public, but with the public. This philosophy will not take hold overnight and needs employee champions. Highlighting teams of paid staff and volunteers who work together to serve the public might reduce some of the tension between volunteers and public sector employees.

Research in the area of unions and volunteers is shallow. What is needed is reliable data in three areas: (1) the attitudes of government employees toward volunteers within their own organization or agency; (2) to what extent the presence of a union contract influences the involvement of volunteers in government services; and (3) how the management of volunteer programs in government settings differs from that practiced in private non-profit organizations. Volunteer managers and coordinators in government organizations and agencies need to seek out their university colleagues to research existing programs. The results of this research can serve as a future guide to the development and enhancement of government-based volunteer programs.

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