

# Self-Help Mutual Aid: An Idea Whose Time Has Come Again

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The self-help movement is booming. Widespread attention is being given to it and there is much evidence that people are increasingly participating in mutual aid groups. Glen Evans in The Family Circle Guide to Self-Help suggests there are 500,000 local self-help groups in the country. A lot of positive attention is being given to the self-help movement in the media. Phil Donahue and other talk show hosts have frequent guests representing self-help groups and many advice columnists refer people to the groups.

The Summer 1981 issue of Voluntary Action Leadership contained a letter by Bruce Stokes of Worldwatch Institute who estimated that the value of services contributed by the self-help movement was nearly as much as the value of services contributed by traditional philanthropic volunteers. If this is so, then the shape of our profession of volunteer administration may undergo drastic change. As Ivan Scheier has cautioned, we cannot yet precisely define ourselves because the people have not all gathered. It is time to look at these self-help volunteers and develop ways volunteer administrators can connect.

This paper will examine the self-help movement, its connection to

philanthropic volunteerism and examples of how volunteer administrators in various contexts might respond programatically.

## DEFINING A SELF-HELP GROUP

The term "self-help mutual aid" is most accurate, since popular usage links "self-help" to self-improvement books and courses or implies solitary, self-aggrandizing behavior. Dr. Alfred Katz, Professor of Public Health at the UCLA Graduate School of Health, describes self-help groups as similar to any other small group: they are people who share personal problems. This sharing is the heart and soul of the group. Help occurs then and there in the group. Furthermore, a self-help group is composed of peers with common goals, with any professional role being minimal and advisory. The group, Katz observes, has shared power, being democratic and often informal. Officers and Robert's Rules are not usually important, there being "no forms and no fees."

Most groups are totally independent of agencies, while others have been started by them or by other professionals. The myth that an agency or professionally-provided service and a self-help group conflict dissolves when we learn that exten-

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sive interaction occurs, including referrals in both directions. The benefits provided complement each other.

A wide variety of structures is evident. Some groups meet weekly; others monthly. Groups will often start out meeting at a member's home but as they get larger (or if they want to appeal to the public) will meet in a house of worship or library, or any accessible and inexpensive place. The size of groups is another variable, ranging from four to over 100, with groups over twenty arranging opportunities for smaller discussion sessions. Groups may be a unique, local "home grown" gathering, cautious about publicity. On the other hand, some groups are part of a well-organized national association. To locate a group, one should locally contact one of the twenty or so self-help clearinghouses, a helpline, or an information and referral service.

#### EXAMPLES OF SELF-HELP GROUPS

The leading edge of the self-help movement is seen in the growth of three groups in New Jersey. Parents Anonymous (for parents who abuse or neglect their children) has grown since 1980 from under 10 chapters to nearly 30. Also since then, Narcotics Anonymous (another group borrowing from Alcoholics Anonymous, the grandparent of all self-help groups) has jumped from 5 to 35 groups. Finally, Tough Love (for parents with acting-out teens) increased from 3 groups in the State in early 1981 to nearly 20 by mid 1982. The N.J. Self-Help Clearinghouse has identified over 400 different groups in the state with some 3,000 local meetings.

The range of concerns these voluntary groups address is as broad as that of the agencies in which they serve. In the health area are found groups such as Mended Hearts, composed of people recuperating from heart surgery who meet to help each other adjust to their new lifestyles. There are numerous general disabilities support groups and special groups such as the Agent Orange Victims

Association, which does advocacy work and conducts support groups of Vietnam vets who were exposed to this chemical and who now suffer Delayed Stress Syndrome.

The area of addiction has Overeater's Anonymous and Gambler's Anonymous and, of course, Alcoholics Anonymous which alone has thousands of meetings. Present as well are thousands of Al-Anon groups for the family of the alcoholic and Al-teen groups for teens whose parents are alcoholic. In the mental health field, Recovery, Inc., founded in the thirties in Chicago, has over 1,000 chapters across the country for people with nervous symptoms. An upsurge of interest is being felt in starting mental patient support groups and family of the mentally ill groups as the process of deinstitutionalization continues. In the death and bereavement area there are many widow and widowers groups such as THEOS and, for parents who have lost a child, The Compassionate Friends.

In the parenting area, besides the examples already given, are numerous adoption and stepparenting groups. In the category of divorced and singles are found many religiously-affiliated support groups with rap sessions and recreational activities. Moreover, the NOW-related womens' support groups and the mens' groups deal with identity and relationship issues.

Finally, some groups do not fit into any neat category: Speak Easy, for those who stutter and need to practice proper speech and get positive feedback from a group; Little People of America, for short-statured people combating stigmatization; and economically-related groups such as tenants associations, food cooperatives and job clubs.

This overview has covered only a few examples of self-help groups. A clearer picture of the movement can come from discussing common characteristics of the groups.

## SERVICES OF GROUPS

Most important of the many services offered by a self-help group is peer support to help people realize they aren't alone in struggling with a problem. Advocacy work is sometimes done to insist on member's rights, to try to improve local agency service, or to implement legislation. Third is education of members through speakers, publications and discussions on various topics at each meeting. Education of the public occurs via literature and public talks about the group's particular life situation focus, as well as presentations to professional bodies. The groups have a lot to volunteer in terms of what it feels like "to have gone through it" and this can be tapped for in-service staff development programs at agencies.

Groups often have a 24-hour phone network or a newsletter for communication between meetings. That this can serve as a vital link between theory and practice to enable people to carry out responsibilities for their treatment is seen in the following story. A leader of a Juvenile Diabetes group received a call early one morning from a new member who was panicked at giving his son the necessary insulin shot. This father had received training from the hospital staff on how to do it, but he froze. The group member, remembering her feelings when she began giving her own child injections, was able to calm him and talk him through it. This is service money can't buy!

Another form of help is that some medical, addiction, and bereavement groups will send visitors to help those who are currently going through the difficult experience. One such program will be described later and works through the volunteer department of a hospital.

## BENEFITS OF GROUPS

What are the basic contributions of self-help groups? First, isolation is eased by speaking with others who

have been there and can give reassurance. Second, the groups help reach the underserved--those who live too far away from a population center with its agencies or those who are resistant for whatever reason to professional services. Third, self-help groups can supplement diminishing agency services. The cuts are coming fast and furiously and self-help groups can be utilized by creative professionals to assist in many ways.

Fourth, groups help supply what the family once commonly provided. Dr. Leonard Borman, Director of the Self-Help Institute in Chicago, has pointed out that self-help is a positive response to the breakdown of traditional institutions: the extended (and now, the nuclear) family; the social glue once provided by religious and civic groups; and living in one place for years. The destruction of such natural helping networks has eliminated rites of passage, familiar role models and neighborliness, while commercial, mobile and mass values have increased. The consciously-created, problem-oriented self-help groups are efforts to make new families.

Another contribution of the groups is in taking problems out of the closet so they can be addressed. People are now saying: "I'm a person, I'm me and I'm proud of it. I have my rights and my responsibilities. I'm not going to be passively taken care of nor ignored. I have my problems but I also have strengths and together we can make it." Both an identity-pride and normalization process are evident.

Finally, groups offer opportunities for people who have gone through a difficulty, people who were aided successfully by an agency, to give something back by being role models for others. This is also related to the "helper principle." Alan Gartner, Co-director of the National Self-Help Clearinghouse, points out that the person who tutors often learns more than the student. Thus the veterans in a self-help group, by assisting the

novices to the experience, also help themselves by gaining perspective on how far they've come and by building their self-esteem through assisting others.

Having surveyed the voluntary self-help field, let us turn to how volunteer administrators can work through a philosophic rationale and expand their activities to cooperate with these groups.

## RELATING VOLUNTEERISM TO SELF-HELP

Volunteer administrators have always known of the "emotional paycheck" received by the volunteer and some recently have begun to market volunteer "opportunities," stressing the various benefits from volunteering. A few have begun work with "transitional volunteers" who are volunteering explicitly in order to aid in rehabilitation. Some are even confronted with court-referred "community service or restitution" volunteers. It is but another step to consider how to refer to, help start, advise and tap the energy and expertise of self-help groups.

There is a personal side for volunteer administrators to consider, too. Each person should think back to any direct experience with a self-help group. Building on one's own involvement with mutual help, or the involvement of a relative or friend, is just as valid a base of expertise as anything written in a book or article. The personal attraction to a group, how and why one became active, etc. can guide a director of volunteers in understanding how to form a self-help group around any concern.

## SELF-HELP CAME BEFORE ORGANIZED VOLUNTEERISM

To conceptualize the self-help-volunteer relationship from a different angle, a brief review of the roots and development of both is in order. By The People--A History of Americans As Volunteers by Susan Ellis and Katherine Noyes, reviews the mutual aid patterns of the 18th and

19th centuries which led to the creation of our municipal services and private non-profit agencies. As these institutional responses to the problems of industrial life grew, professions emerged. Only within ethnic and labor groups did widespread self-help modes continue. Once Federal funds began flowing in earnest to social programs during the Depression, volunteerism began to be defined by our emerging profession (especially since World War II) as citizens helping agency professionals deliver services.

Now, however, we are at the end of the period of ever-expanding agencies with their volunteer components. Public support for institutional ways of solving problems has shrunk and we must look again at the self-help ways of doing things which had been our primary way of meeting human needs before, say, our Centennial.

The change in public policy is not simply due to Reaganomics but also is based on a realization of the limitations and even of the paternalism of some of our social service institutions. Christopher Lasch has written of this in The Culture of Narcissism.

In 1978, the President's Commission on Mental Health described self-help groups as an untapped resource and urged the creation of new self-help clearinghouses. The 1979 Surgeon General's Report echoed this and urged professionals to make more use of such groups. In a review of the seventies by The New York Times, the growth of the self-help movement was named as the most significant development in behavioral science during the decade. In Alvin Toffler's book, The Third Wave, he describes the new attitude favoring people participating--not simply receiving services or providing services--and he coins a new term for it: "prosumerism." This well describes the trend to become active in meeting one's own needs locally with other people who share a common situation or problem.

Even closer to home, Sam Brown, then Director of ACTION, made self-

help the subject of his keynote speech at the 1979 AVA-AVB-AVAS National Conference on Volunteerism. It was later printed in Volunteer Administration as "Self Help: Building Communities of Competence" (Winter, 1979). He applauded the healthy development of self-help, called it a form of volunteerism and charged volunteer administrators to begin incorporating it in their work. The programs created in response to emergencies, to meet perceived human needs and in an effort to advance justice were needed, he said, and to a large degree helpful, but bit by bit the cumulative effect has been to strip away from individuals the sure sense that they have control or responsibility over their lives.

The self-help movement enables people to once again become active locally in solving their problems and this is the essence of volunteerism. A new balance between what individual citizens do and what the government should do is being struck by the self-help movement--a balance which transcends political or philosophical labels. There are already fewer agencies and professionals providing services so the survivors are searching for ways to make more efficient use of their time. Working with and through self-help groups is one avenue by which services might be continued.

On the other hand, simplistic rhetoric from Washington about volunteerism and self-help substituting for decreased services must be challenged. Frank Riesmann, editor of Social Policy magazine, has pointed out that the basic Reagan cutbacks affect jobs, welfare, housing, food, education, day care, services for the elderly, etc. He warns that self-help groups cannot possibly meet all these problems. Self-help groups can, as informed advocates, struggle to aid related agencies maintain vital services by appealing to funding bodies.

Since Brown's keynote three years ago, signs of increasing interest in self-help are popping up among vol-

unteer administrators. The Volunteer Leader, the publication of hospital volunteer administrators, printed an excellent piece in its Fall 1980 issue, "Self Help Groups Offer New Service Options" by Carol Keenan. A National Self-Help Clearinghouse staffer was a resource person at the Spring 1981 National Conference on Citizen Involvement, while the author of this article presented a workshop on this subject at the October 1981 AVA-AVB-AVAS National Conference on Volunteerism. Voluntary Action Leadership includes in its yearly index a category called "Self-Help," listing articles dealing with neighborhood revitalization and anti-crime groups. The January-March 1981 Journal of Voluntary Action Research contains a review of a book by major self-help author Phyllis Silverman.

With an understanding of the self-help movement part of volunteerism and being motivated to develop constructive and cost-efficient new ways to foster social services, let us examine exemplary models within the different contexts volunteer administrators work.

#### SELF-HELP GROUP PROMOTION BY CIVIC AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS

The Essex County, New Jersey Section of the National Council of Jewish Women strives to blend needs and skills of volunteers from their 4,400 members with unmet community needs. After consultation with the N.J. Self-Help Clearinghouse, Project GRO (Groups Reaching Out) was launched in 1981. Women were recruited and trained based on their having been through key life experiences which needs assessment revealed as problematic for area women. Peer support groups are now facilitated by these volunteers around various issues: Women With Small Children, Women With Aging Parents, Women Going Through Divorce, Widows, Adoptive Mothers, and other concerns as interest arises. Blanche Dorman, Volunteer Director, helps screen potential facilitators a-

long with handling potential volunteers for other Council volunteer projects. She reports an extremely high caliber of women coming forward to share their own personal experiences and also that Project GRO has stimulated increased volunteering on behalf of other projects.

Other service groups convene support groups. The National Council of Negro Women has a project to get Debtors' Anonymous groups going for people who have budget planning and credit card problems. One Junior League chapter in New Jersey started Chemocare, a peer counseling service for cancer patients; another is planning a group of parents suffering fetal and stillborn deaths of infants.

Religious organizations are the most popular sites for all self-help group meetings and are involved in other ways. The Lutheran Social Services Committee in North Dakota invites parishioners to volunteer their availability to speak with other people about crucial life experiences in a program called Friends. Over a dozen groups have emerged from these pairings. Singles or widow/widower groups are commonly sponsored by congregations of all faiths. Just as religious organizations have begun utilizing volunteer administration techniques, so volunteer administrators may be able to learn from them how to weave together self-help and traditional volunteerism.

#### HOSPITAL VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS TAPPING SELF-HELP ENERGY

Volunteer Directors can utilize local self-help groups as sources of specialized or "like kind" volunteers. As the DVS at a psychiatric hospital a few years ago, the author brought in members of Recovery, Inc. and Overeater's Anonymous to present monthly educational programs for patients. Since patient education was a nursing function, members' hours were logged as nursing volunteers, yet they were not put through orientation or required to wear jackets.

The DVS announced the programs at morning staff meetings, put up posters and occasionally observed the meetings. Group reps passed out lists of local meetings so patients could get involved once they went home.

At Newark Beth-Israel Hospital, DVS Sonia Brody initiated a program whereby members of Open Heart (recovering heart patients) formed a visitation committee. These visitors are trained and come in daily to see pre-operative patients, doing what no one else could so effectively--reassuring the patient by their presence and encouragement.

Another way a DVS could interact with self-help groups is by being a liaison to or starter of a group. Nancy McBain at Abington Memorial Hospital in Pennsylvania has developed these roles with both an ostomy and a stroke club and a chapter of Make Today Count (for people with life-threatening illness and their families). An administrator of the hospital is pleased with her connection to these groups because patients can thereby be referred more easily and the hospital welcomes community groups to use its facilities. Similar roles are played by both the DVS and the Auxiliary of Parkway General Hospital in North Miami Beach regarding cancer patients, people with pacemakers, lung disease, arthritis and heart problems.

The most common hospital involvement with self-help groups is in the cancer area, with nurses leading the way. The DVS, however, is in a unique position to be able both to suggest community resources at the appropriate point to aid in a patient's emotional adjustment, and to channel the grateful recovered patient's energies into assisting in humanizing the curing of others.

#### VOLUNTEER BUREAUS AND VACS

Volunteer recruitment agencies--especially those with an information and referral component--can develop into local self-help clearinghouses. The VAC of Northeast Pennsylvania

in Scranton, for example, received grants in early 1982 to hire two staff to identify local self-help groups and to train professionals in working with these groups.

Clearly the opportunity exists for the creative volunteer-promoting organization to shape new approaches to apply personnel resources to help solve problems. This is their mandate. VACs can work more extensively with "like kind" volunteers by encouraging volunteer directors to create job descriptions based on volunteers sharing what they've been through. Another option is inviting representatives from self-help groups to workshops and meetings of volunteer administrators.

#### OTHER CONTEXTS FOR CONNECTING VOLUNTEERS AND SELF-HELP

The volunteers who work one-to-one with clients of mental health agencies as Community Companions or out of elderly service centers as Friendly Visitors can be equipped to help natural leaders convene support groups, or to establish phone chains.

The traditional concerns of health foundations have been raising money to eliminate the illness and to educate the public. The need for patient services is an increasing priority and some foundations are encouraging self-help groups for both patients and family.

A support group for single parents is a natural offshoot of running a big brother/big sister-type program.

Volunteer administrators working with neighborhood, anti-crime, economic development and co-op groups are already taking a self-help approach. Sufficient stress needs to be given to the emotional support aspect, however, since advocacy efforts often take the spotlight.

Volunteer administrators are often involved with the personal lives of volunteers and sometimes do counseling. Referrals to self-help groups can be made as part of the response to volunteers' needs.

Finally, DOVIAs and local AVA

groups could become more of a self-help forum for giving and receiving personal and professional support. As volunteer administrators are often isolated at the agency, with no one else doing what they do, mutual support is needed to prevent burnout.

#### SUMMARY

The decrease in public support for agency methods of delivering human services presents an enormous challenge to volunteer administrators. To the extent volunteer programs are tied to professional-intensive institutions, they will be asked to do more with less staff, budgets and time of supervisors.

But to the degree volunteer administrators can broaden their perspectives and assertively and creatively connect with the self-help movement, all kinds of new avenues of volunteer service and sources for agency revitalization will open up. The result will be true teamwork, facilitated by volunteer administrators, between professionals and self-helpers--teamwork whose first generation of leaders will lay the foundation for social policy for years to come.