

# Government Volunteers: Why and How?

Joan Brown

Why are people willing to volunteer for their local government when there is a strong "anti-government/government is wasteful" attitude? Why is the most challenging problem for the Coordinator of the Civic Center Volunteers Program in Marin County, California creating enough jobs for the number of people who want to volunteer...rather than not having enough volunteers? The answer to both these questions is that the Civic Center Volunteers program gives volunteers what they want! Specifically, the program is responding to the current socio-economic trends.

Volunteers are encouraged to openly state their personal agendas and goals and the County strives to provide jobs to meet these needs. This means that re-entry women who want to update their skills, and to have training, evaluation and a letter of recommendation when they hit the job market, have an opportunity to get job-ready. This means there are challenging jobs for retired men and women who want to keep intellectually active and to have a real sense of responsibility and accomplishment. This means there are opportunities for students and career-changers to explore various professional fields (e.g., law, health, data processing) before they invest years and dollars in a potential career. This means testing grounds are

provided for "transitionals," usually referred by psychiatrists, who need to establish some structure and success after experiencing mental illness. By meeting the needs of volunteers in specific ways, the County, too, has its needs met.

## WHY WAS THE CIVIC CENTER VOLUNTEERS PROGRAM STARTED?

County government faced large cutbacks in California after the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978. Department heads were struggling to maintain an adequate service level to the public while trying to implement severe budget restrictions and reductions. During one of the Board of Supervisors budget sessions, after hearing department after department complain that they could not maintain service with the imposed budget cuts, a member of a local tax group quipped, "...all this County needs is a few volunteers and all your problems will be solved." Fortunately, one member of the Board of Supervisors took that kernel of an idea and saw the possibilities of an effective volunteer program to supplement paid staff. She convinced the rest of the Board of Supervisors to try a pilot program utilizing volunteers. The total funding was merely \$1,500 to pay for a half-time Volunteer Coordinator for twelve weeks.

Thus the Civic Center Volunteers was the product of a political re-

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sponse to an annoyed citizen. There were no goals or objectives discussed. No task analysis had been made to determine needs for volunteers. With twenty hours a week for twelve weeks, in an era when citizens were loudly proclaiming their displeasure with local government, there seemed little hope that a county volunteer program would succeed. That was almost five years ago. Today the fourteen hundred paid employees are supported by a pool of volunteers covering 180 positions, contributing 3,800 hours each month, at an estimated dollar value of \$446,432.88<sup>1</sup> for fiscal 1982-1983.

After the first year, the half-time "extra hire" Volunteer Coordinator position was made a permanent 3/4 time position by the Board of Supervisors. After two years, it was funded full time.

#### WHY IS THE VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR IN THE PERSONNEL OFFICE?

The local Volunteer Bureau was first offered a short term contract to establish a volunteer program for the County. However, based on previous experience in several County departments, the Volunteer Bureau refused the contract, stating it was imperative for the Volunteer Coordinator to be "on site," in direct daily contact with the staff, and part of the team. As it evolved, the Volunteer Coordinator was placed in the County Personnel Office.

Clear communication by the Personnel Office made a public statement that (1) all job-related factors were to be weighed and coordinated, and (2) the volunteer jobs were to supplement, not replace, paid staff, thus making it more possible to deal with the emotions derived from recent cutbacks. Other advantages to being placed in Personnel include:

1. The County staff is used to dealing with Personnel for jobs that need to be filled and consider volunteer jobs as one more resource provided by that office.

2. County departments are already accustomed to thinking of bringing personnel problems to the Personnel Office. Because the Civic Center Volunteers Program provides personnel management back-up to the staff, it is a natural channel already established.

3. People who are "browsing" for a job often come into the Personnel Office, see the volunteer jobs listed, and are immediately connected with the program when they express an interest.

4. Volunteers are attracted by the "jobs, training, experience" emphasis of the volunteer program and feel it is a natural starting point in preparation for paid employment.

#### WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE CIVIC CENTER VOLUNTEERS PROGRAM?

The Civic Center Volunteers program is structured around a contract and strong management principles.

A potential volunteer is likely to make an appointment to interview with the Volunteer Coordinator after responding to a classified ad in the local paper describing a specific job. After filling out an application and interest inventory, the Volunteer Coordinator and the potential volunteer have an in-depth "job interview," usually lasting an hour. While the potential volunteer is still in the office, the Volunteer Coordinator will call one or more departments to have the person interview with the specific department right then. One of the important aspects of this program is immediate action.

When a "match" is made between the department and the volunteer, they sign a contract for the specific job for specific hours, days and length of time. A typical contract for clerical work might be fifteen hours a week for three months while the coordinator of a project might sign a contract for one year. It

should be noted that because job experience and training are emphasized, typical volunteer commitments are 15 to 25 hours a week.

The volunteer is oriented to the job and department by the individual department supervisor, while the Volunteer Coordinator gives a general orientation to all volunteers. After one month on the job, the volunteer and supervisor have an "Update Review" in which each expresses the aspects that are going well and areas that need some modification. At the end of the contract, the volunteer is evaluated on the same form as paid employees and is given a letter of recommendation. Each volunteer also has an "Exit Interview" with the Volunteer Coordinator.

In addition, the volunteers receive a monthly newsletter, the opportunity to network by having lunch each week with other volunteers and the Volunteer Coordinator, and other "support" which might be appropriate depending on the volunteer's need. Additionally, three times a year, the Board of Supervisors awards a Resolution of Commendation (individually written by the Civic Center Volunteers office) to each volunteer who successfully completes a contract.

#### HOW WAS STAFF SUPPORT GAINED?

Initially, the County Administrator was skeptical about acceptance of volunteers, making the comment: "Many departments will probably adopt the attitude that volunteers are o.k. for someone else but my department is too technical...." This did not prove to be the case.

Staff support was gained in a number of ways. One was through the initial memo, reprinted as Appendix A. In it, the Volunteer Coordinator outlined the professional aspects of the program, assuring staff there would be screening, a contract and structure. The memo also made it clear that each supervisor/department would make the ultimate decision to accept or reject a par-

ticular volunteer. Openly giving this power to each department was an important part of gaining staff support. No one likes to feel someone is being forced on them. This is doubly true with a new program and unknown parameters. The initial memo also stated that the Volunteer Coordinator would not refer an unqualified volunteer to a department just so a "slot is filled," and projected the belief and optimism that qualified volunteers would be found. Clearly stated from the onset was the statement that volunteer jobs are to supplement, NOT replace paid staff. By encouraging departments to think in terms of job segments that volunteers could do, the task was broken into a manageable framework. The memo also gave departments the latitude to ask for exactly what they wanted.

The goal was to generate ten good volunteer jobs. The response from the departments totaled one hundred requests. Obviously, the need was there! The Personnel Director and Volunteer Coordinator then prioritized twenty-five jobs from various departments and skill levels.

Word of mouth has traditionally been the best advertisement for a product and the same proved true for the Civic Center Volunteers. Soon after the initial twenty-five volunteers were placed, word began to spread among the departments. The Volunteer Coordinator began receiving calls from departments who had taken a "sit back and watch" attitude who were now saying, "I hear you get fabulous volunteers. How do we get on the bandwagon?"

Not surprisingly, it is sometimes easier for a supervisor to respond to a specific individual's set of skills and personality, rather than risk requesting a job. Therefore, while a potential volunteer is still in the Volunteer Coordinator's office, the Coordinator may create a specific job by calling a department and saying, for example, "I have a man in my office who was a professional news photo-

grapher for thirty-three years, has his own equipment and developing lab at home and wants to volunteer for the County. Do you have a project on the back burner that might utilize his skills?" It is estimated that in fifty percent of such cases, the Volunteer Coordinator spurs the creation of a specific job for a specific volunteer.

#### WHAT ABOUT THE UNIONS?

What at first seemed unfortunate timing, ultimately turned out to be an advantage. The Civic Center Volunteers program was begun the month prior to the County's first union strike. Understandably, the unions were suspicious and concerned that the volunteers might be used to keep local government operational during the strike.

The policy and communications regarding the unions have been open and clear from the first day. The volunteers are in place to help the overworked county employee, not to replace that person or job.

The union called for a "rolling strike," whereby the employees worked on unpredictable schedules, calling a hot line each night to find out if they were to report to work the next day or not. In a spirit of cooperation and support, the Volunteer Coordinator was able to give the volunteers the union hot line number to call. They, too, called to find out if the next day was a "work" or "strike" day.

The Volunteer Coordinator was able to gain the support of all the volunteers except one, who could not be persuaded to honor the strike. In a step to maintain open, direct communication, the Volunteer Coordinator told a union steward of the situation and expressed her own frustration in not being successful in winning the volunteer's support. The union steward's response was: "Just as I can't make every union member walk out, I know you can't control every volunteer. Thanks for the effort."

Because the volunteers showed their support for the paid staff from the onset, the relationship between the rank and file worker and the volunteer has been supportive and appreciative, rather than suspicious or fearful.

From the practical standpoint, it is unrealistic to believe that volunteer staff can replace the continuity of a forty hour a week/year-in, year-out employee. Volunteers can, however, be a critical force in increasing productivity, adding desirable services or products, and in freeing paid staff from particular aspects of their jobs to make them available for other tasks. For example, a volunteer in charge of the jail commissary can free a uniformed officer for more technical duties.

#### WHAT ARE THE MOST EFFECTIVE RECRUITMENT METHODS?

As with any good program, word of mouth is the best source of new volunteers. Because the Civic Center Volunteers provides meaningful job experience, it has a high profile and has earned prestige in the community.

On an on-going basis, the steady flow of interested volunteers is maintained by weekly classified ads listed under "V" for Volunteers in both the daily and weekly neighborhood papers. (Note they are not on the Women's pages where men and students are not likely to see them.) The jobs are introduced in the weeklies with the lead:

*Update your experience and resume. Sign a contract for a specific job to increase or gain new skills, receive supervision and evaluation while helping the county. Call Joan Brown at 499-6104 for an interview for any of these or other jobs currently available through the Civic Center Volunteers.*

The ads are for specific jobs and are written to be descriptive and enticing. For example:

*PLANNER AIDE for Open Space*

*District. Variety and diversity for volunteer experienced in map skills and able to think geographically.*

*RECEPTIONIST/CLERK for Probation. Light typing, phones, lots of people contact. Interesting entry level position.*

*BROCHURE EDITOR. Volunteer needed with good eye for graphics; utilize writing skills for Commission on Status of Women.*

*PARK INVENTORY SPECIALIST to take inventory at park sites and summarize into a report.*

*APPRAISAL RECORD ANALYST to paper screen appraisals. Great for retired Broker or Appraiser.*

*PUBLIC GUARDIAN AIDE. Terrific job for self motivated volunteer with an interest in geriatrics. Good opportunity to improve quality of care of conservatorship sites.*

However, to launch the program and acquaint the public, the local daily newspaper ran an article entitled "25 JOB OPENINGS AT CIVIC CENTER--FOR VOLUNTEERS." The article stressed the contract, evaluation, and training aspects of the program. It set the tone of the program and also discussed the pending strike. The day after the article was published, the Volunteer Coordinator scheduled fifty-five interviews for the twenty-five initial jobs! From the beginning, volunteers knew they were competing for volunteer job opportunities and felt successful to be selected to volunteer for the County! Obviously, the Civic Center Volunteers program was an idea whose time had come.

Sprinkled throughout the year are "human interest" articles. In addition, every January, June and September volunteers receive Resolutions of Commendation from the Board of Supervisors. The ceremonies are covered in the daily and weekly papers. This serves three purposes: (1) the volunteers receive

important recognition; (2) the Board of Supervisors is updated on the specific tasks the volunteers have completed; and (3) the Civic Center Volunteers has guaranteed press coverage at least three times a year.

#### WHAT KINDS OF JOBS DO VOLUNTEERS DO?

Virtually all the County departments have utilized volunteers. The jobs are limited only by physical space, staff time or imagination. The highest utilization of volunteer hours has been in the following departments:

1. Citizen's Service Department
2. Sheriff's Department
3. Health and Human Services (no direct service hours)<sup>2</sup>
4. District Attorney
5. Parks and Recreation (no recreation hours)<sup>3</sup>
6. Probation

Sample jobs include:

#### CITIZENS SERVICE DEPARTMENT:

Grant Writers--(successfully won \$95,000 grant for Human Rights Education project)

Mediation Coordinators and Volunteers (ultimately funded privately)--mediate disputes between landlords and tenants, advise small claims claimants, etc.

Youth Commission Project Coordinator--coordinated food and bid items for fundraiser raising \$5,000 for youth center

Minute Takers for several commissions

Public Guardian Aide--visits cases to determine care, oversees moving of belongings, etc.

Veteran's Aide--determines validity and eligibility of cases and carries to appeal

Brochure Editor/Writer for various commissions

Statistician--graphically displayed Affirmative Action statistics for Board of Supervisors presentation

Trainer for County staff for Affirmative Action program

Telephone Interviewers for Women's Needs Assessment

#### SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT:

Identification Technician--takes finger prints and photos of non-criminals.

Background Investigator--investigates backgrounds for Sheriff's Patrol and volunteers.

Commissary Aide--does all ordering and distributing of items in jail

Recreation Coordinator in Jail--established yard schedule, got paint donated for inmates to paint court lines, got money donated for gym shoes

Career Counselor in Jail--realistic career counseling and creator of jobs in community for inmates upon release (ultimately grant funded)

Jazzercise for female inmates in jail

Booking Clerk in jail

Librarian--organized and indexed professional library

Clerical--runs shredder, microfiche, etc.

Crime Analysts Aides in Career Criminal Apprehension Unit--mostly senior citizens tracking and computerizing weekly crime statistics, mapping, reporting, recovering and matching lost property (two paid staff: twelve to fifteen senior citizen volunteers)

Crime Prevention Aides--house checks, speak to community groups, staff van with samples of locks, window latches

Coordinator of Children's Identification Program

#### HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES:

Medical Liaison-PhD in Pharmacology established minimum health standards with medical community for infants from birth to five years.

Registered Nurses at Blood Pressure Clinics

Biochemist at Public Health Laboratory wrote manual for statewide distribution on procedures.

Coordinator of Influenza Clinics

Administrative Aide to Director of Social Services--attends meetings, researches legislation

Trainer to teachers in schools about revision in state law re: abused children

Authors/Editors--three booklets published and distributed nationally on Foster Care issues

Data Entry Operator for Southeastern Asian Refugee program

Demonstrators of Car Seats for Infants program

Court Hostess for juvenile cases

Editor of year-end report for mental health program

Program Planner Aide for Mental Health

Librarian established and catalogued professional library in Mental Health

Translators for Well-Baby Clinics

#### DISTRICT ATTORNEY:

Legal Researcher

Word Processor Operator

Victim/Witness Interviewers

Paralegals doing consumer case intake and follow-through

#### PARKS & RECREATION:

Groundskeepers

Cartographers for Open Space District to research information and map district boundaries, etc.

Planners (professionally trained)  
--evaluate EIRs, grazing policies.

Ushers for Performing Arts Center

PROBATION:

Alternative Sentencing In-take Coordinators

Alternative Sentencing Community Outreach Job Development Coordinator

Teachers of weightlifting and cooking at Juvenile Hall

Investigator for Work Program--on site visits to check that inmates are at jobs

SUPERIOR COURT:

Arbitration Coordinator

Word Processor Operator produced Grand Jury Report

Jury Coordinator--special three week project of extra court hearings to clear up backlog of drunk driving cases...volunteer executed all logistics and orientation of jurors

Legal Researchers

Jury Aides answer jurors' questions re: scheduling, postponements

DATA PROCESSING:

Programmers (twenty to forty hours a week)

Editor of program directions written in lay terms vs. "computerese"

PERSONNEL:

Personnel Assistant--hosts oral boards, ranks applications, statistical research

Training Coordinator--researches and plans training sessions for County management training

Statistician--compiles and draws conclusions from recruiting efforts

Docents give tours of building to public

Aides for Civic Center Volunteers program--track hours, interview volunteers and write for monthly newsletter, compute cost/benefit statistics.

Hosts for Information Booth at building's entrance

PUBLIC WORKS:

Draftsmen

Surveyor Aides

MORE JOBS, NOT GROUPED BY DEPARTMENTS:

Typists

Receptionists

Ombudsmen for long term care facilities

Aides in Law Library

Intake Interviewers for Disaster Center during floods

Dieticians

Planning Aides in Local Area Formation Commission

Staff to Jail Visitor's Center

Aides to Board of Supervisors doing research and constituent work

Photographers--for brochures, displays and clinics

Job Search Trainers for CETA

Consultants--CPA, Farm Advisor, Surveys...

Accounting Assistant--Auditor-Controller

Library volunteers in traditional and non-traditional roles

Attorneys and Para-Legals for research in County Counsel

Reprographic Aides in the in-house print shop

DO VOLUNTEERS EVER GET PAID JOBS WITH THE COUNTY?

Yes, some do. And virtually all

who are serious job seekers and who have successfully completed volunteer contracts do find jobs as a direct result of their experience. This is facilitated through their networking, contacts, current experience, training and references, as well as often new found self-confidence. For re-entry women especially, it is easier to be enthusiastic and confident in a job interview when discussing current involvements at work versus recollections of ten to fifteen years ago.

#### HOW DO THE CIVIC CENTER VOLUNTEERS AND VOLUNTEER BUREAU INTERACT?

The relationship between the Volunteer Bureau, which provides volunteers to private non-profit organizations, and the Civic Center Volunteers program is cordial, mutually-beneficial and cooperative. Each is respectful of the other's turf. Clear areas of responsibility were openly discussed and agreed to at the beginning. Both agencies enthusiastically refer appropriate volunteers to each other, knowing that the only way to have a successful placement is to have the right person in the right job. Communication between the Volunteer Bureau and the Civic Center Volunteers is almost a daily occurrence.

#### WHAT'S HAPPENED DURING THE RECESSION?

The effects of the current recession have had both positive and negative effects on the program. Many re-entry women who had not had to work in recent years, but now felt forced to, did not feel they could afford the three months minimum commitment to volunteer. This urgency to supplement the family income was reflected in a slight decrease in volunteer hours last spring. However, as the recession continued, the Civic Center Volunteers program attracted extremely qualified volunteers who had spent five to seven unsuccessful months in the job search. They were then willing to

make the volunteer commitment to maintain their skills, network, and regain their flagging confidence.

#### CONCLUSION

If your local government has meaningful jobs that need to be done, and can provide training and supervision, and, if your community has re-entry women, career-changers, students, and senior citizens, you may be able to increase services beyond your fondest dreams and budgets. Critical elements for the success of such a program include: (1) gaining staff support; (2) tailoring the job as closely as possible to what the volunteer wants; (3) cutting through the bureaucracy, not being part of it; (4) acting promptly for both the department and the volunteer; and (5) providing structure, evaluation, references, and recognition.

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#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Based on estimated County hourly costs of \$7.90 clerical, \$10.50 para professional and \$16.00 professional. This figure does not include volunteers on commissions or boards, direct service volunteers in Health and Human Services, Reserve Sheriff's Patrol or Volunteer Firefighters.*

<sup>2</sup>*Marin County has had a separate contract with the Volunteer Bureau for a number of years to provide direct client support in Health and Human Services.*

<sup>3</sup>*The cities, not County government, provide recreation activities in our communities.*



**COUNTY OF MARIN**  
**INTER-OFFICE MEMORANDUM**

TO: All Department Heads

FROM: Joan Brown, Coordinator of Volunteers  
Personnel Department, extension 2013

SUBJECT: PILOT VOLUNTEER PROGRAM  
Action Required by: Monday February 5, 1979

DATE: January 25, 1979

*Joan Brown*

WHY HAVE A VOLUNTEER PROGRAM?

Realizing that many county employees are over-burdened as a result of Proposition 13 cuts, the Board of Supervisors has funded a pilot volunteer program.

WHY DO PEOPLE VOLUNTEER?

Here are the results of an ACTION survey of people's reasons for volunteering.

| REASON                         | 1965 | 1974 |
|--------------------------------|------|------|
| Wanted to help others          | 37%  | 53%  |
| Had sense of duty              | 33%  | 32%  |
| Enjoy volunteer work itself    | 30%  | 36%  |
| Had nothing else to do         | 4%   | 4%   |
| Hoped would lead to paying job | 3%   | 3%   |

WHY DO WE THINK WE CAN RECRUIT HIGHLY QUALIFIED VOLUNTEERS?

We will be utilizing the "Professional Volunteers" or the "Volunteer Contract" approach.

We believe there are students seeking course credit and skilled women considering re-entry who will find our jobs the most effective type of on-the-job training available to them. Therefore, we plan to interview every applicant and match him/her specifically with your specific job. Both your department and the volunteer will clearly define and understand the goals and scope of the job, adequate training, if necessary, will be provided to the volunteer, a structured evaluation and review process will be used and, upon completion of the job, references will be available to the volunteer to help build his/her resume.

We also believe that there may be retired professionals who will donate their time and experience. If appropriate jobs are generated, we will also try to attract business professionals and businesses to grant release time to

benefit the county. In other communities, many businesses are making considerable "donations" in response to their windfall profits from Prop. 13 tax savings. Why not here?

We are committed to placing only the "right" person in your job. If that person can not be found, we will not risk failure in your department, to the volunteer or the program by placing an inappropriate person just so a "slot is filled". WE WANT THIS TO WORK FOR YOU!

#### WHAT DOES THE DEPARTMENT HEAD HAVE TO DO?

We are asking you to consider how to integrate volunteer help into your organization. These jobs are to supplement staff, NOT replace paid staff.

A response should be back to me by Monday, February 5th. I will be contacting you over the next week to discuss options in your department and how the volunteer program can best help you.

#### WHAT CRITERIA MIGHT THE DEPARTMENT HEAD CONSIDER WHILE IDENTIFYING VOLUNTEER AID?

1. There need to be whole segments delegated to make sense, not just bits and pieces. The best motivator to keep people on the job is the work itself. This is certainly true of volunteers. Busy work entails little motivation or satisfaction. Since volunteers don't get the rewards of paid staff, if they don't get satisfaction, they don't get anything at all.

2. Some thought might be given to who will supervise and help train the volunteers within your department. Getting good volunteers is the task of recruitment--keeping them is everybody's job.

The possibilities of this program are exciting and I look forward to working with you on them. Please feel free to contact me (extension 2013) for any additional information which might be helpful.

JB;jw