

# Moving Along: Case Studies of Career Paths for Volunteer Coordinators

Ivan Scheier

In 1984, Harriet Naylor addressed the national conference of the Association of Voluntary Action Scholars. She selected as her topic "Beyond Managing Volunteers." The following is an excerpt from that speech:

*Growth and change have occurred in our profession and in many of its individual practices. As an honorary life member of the Association for Volunteer Administration, I am proud of THE JOURNAL OF VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATION, an impressive body of knowledge, an ethics statement, and the calibre of emerging leadership—all developed during intensive and conscientious practice in a burgeoning constituency.*

*Still, individual improvement has led many potential leaders out of our ranks into higher levels in their own or other organizations. We hope that there they are advocates for the volunteer potential, but we have lost them to organizational loyalties and higher salaries.*

The following article focuses directly on Hat Naylor's concerns. Because THE JOURNAL OF VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATION has expressed the desire to keep Hat's memory alive through a continuing examination of the issues that concerned her, we are delighted to present Ivan Scheier's study of career paths in volunteer administration.

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## INTRODUCTION

A recent inventory of "The Ingredients of Volunteer Leadership" (Yellowfire Mini-Series, #13), identified over 100 competencies, such as Administrator, Career Counselor, Educator and Networker. The analysis concluded that:

*The volunteer coordinator is a versatile and creative generalist, whose skills and experience merit and should earn solid respect, status and financial compensation, should she/he stay in the volunteer leadership field. Otherwise, these competencies and experiences qualify their possessor for a wide range of other meaningful jobs.*

Not enough documented evidence exists on how much respect and status the skills of a volunteer coordinator earn her/him, within our profession or in transition to another. We only suspect strongly that, for many, the career is more a transition than a culmination. A mid-1970's study indicated that about half of all volunteer coordinators leave the field within two years. Recently, a trainer colleague told of asking a DOVIA (local association

of volunteer coordinators) audience to envision where they might be five years hence. Only about one in ten still saw themselves in the role of volunteer coordinator!

Is our field really a dead-ender, with upward mobility severely limited or impossible? If so, where do volunteer coordinators go when they leave? What do they do? Are they still interested in the volunteer leadership field, and willing to contribute in some way?

The present study attempts to begin answering these questions, via an "alumnae" survey form (appendix) and/or interviews directed to people who no longer worked full time in the volunteer leadership field. Volunteer coordinator alumni were difficult to find; there are only 14 case studies here, plus partial data on ten other people. Moreover, the case studies include five people who are not complete alums; rather, they are simply no longer in the volunteer coordinator role full time.

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Ivan Scheier, PhD is one of the foremost thinkers in volunteerism today. His credentials include numerous books and articles, as well as the leadership of many volunteer efforts. These days his primary interest is as travelling consultant and as prime mover of Yellowfire Press. The article presented here will be available as a part of the Yellowfire Mini-Series. Ivan wishes to thank Janice Allen for her review and comments.

In any event, 24 cases doth not a research make, especially since we cannot be sure our sample is representative. Still, there are some trends here, some patterns, some inklings of significance for current contemplation and future research directions.

The next section summarizes these trends, followed by the case studies themselves, and a final analytical section.

## SUMMARY OF MAIN TRENDS

Our sample averaged seven to eight years in the field of volunteer administration—one suspects rather longer than most stay in this career line. The sample also probably over-represents, somewhat, roles as resource people to volunteer coordinators (e.g., trainers, consultants).

Most but not all of the people in our sample made the career move of their own volition, often using considerable initiative; that is, they weren't fired or laid off.

Here are some main trends:

1. Our sample "left the field" in two main ways:

- a) Job *change*, (most of our cases) in which the person no longer spends any time directly coordinating volunteer programs.
- b) Job *enlargement*, in which the person continues to have some direct involvement close-up with the volunteer program (typically half-time or less) but does a number of other things as well. Often there is now another person to help with the operation of the volunteer program.

2. In job enlargement, the people in our sample always remain in the nonprofit sector. Job change people are more likely to move into the profit sector, but even here the majority stay in the nonprofit workplace.

3. In virtually every case, either of job enlargement or change, the move represented career advancement in terms of status and challenge and usually money, too. Job change, of course, carries with it a change in job title; job enlargement usually does, too, with the new title being a more "important" one.

4. Job enlargement and job change have in common increased concentration in the following areas:

- a) management, administration, executive responsibilities, personnel
- b) training and education, staff development
- c) communications (writing and speaking skills), public relations
- d) fundraising, resource development
- e) program development, planning

5. The clear majority of our sample agreed that the experience and skills gained as a volunteer coordinator aided their effectiveness in their new position. Mentioned most frequently were the five areas of concentration listed above (par. 4), plus knowledge of motivation and how to handle money. Familiarity with certain kinds of clients and situations gained as a volunteer coordinator was also a response. Finally, in some cases, such as executive of a small nonprofit or fundraiser, knowledge of volunteers was extremely valuable since volunteers played a vital role in the success of the new job function.

8. Our job enlargement sample of course keeps in touch with the volunteer field; they are still partly *in* it. The pattern is more mixed for job change cases. Approximately half appear to keep in some kind of touch with former colleagues, but this is sometimes more on a personal level than a professional level. Several of those who did not keep contact professionally, said they would get involved if asked, and gave examples of potentially useful contributions they might make.

This summary by no means does justice to the more complete and individualized information in the case studies which follow.

## THE CASE STUDIES

Invented names and occasional alteration of identifying detail are to protect the anonymity of contributors.

### A. Job Change Case Studies:

#### **John Doe**

For eight years, John was a volunteer,

then a trainer, consultant and evaluator in the field of volunteerism. For the past five years, he has been an extremely successful stockbroker. He enjoys the work, and his income is many times what it was in his volunteerism days.

John emphatically attributes much of his current success to his volunteerism experience. This legacy includes a special sensitivity to people's motivation, a style of building a program around where the person actually is, rather than where you think they should be. (He specifically mentions Minimax, in this regard.)

John also relies heavily on skills acquired as a trainer in his former career. Thus, he uses well-conducted free workshops as a means of developing new clients. For a short while after the job change, John kept fairly actively involved with volunteerism as a field, in his spare time. He no longer does so, but does keep contact personally with some of his friends and colleagues from those days. Many of these are also the satisfied clients of his new profession.

### **Clara Sellars**

Clara was a volunteer coordinator from 1964 to 1972, in settlement house and in mental health settings. Since then she's been a theatrical press agent for classical performing arts and theater, and president of a small communications agency, specializing in political media, environmental affairs, and a mix of commercial and nonprofit advertising and public relations accounts.

Clara doesn't think her volunteer coordinator-acquired skills helped her *get* subsequent positions in the first place, but they definitely contributed to her effectiveness in these roles. Ghetto experience in her first volunteer coordinator position translated to specialization in *black* performance arts. The mental hospital volunteer coordinator work helped Clara be more comfortable dealing with all types of extreme personalities in performers and in her clients.

Clara doesn't currently keep in touch with the volunteer leadership field, but can think of several ways in which she could still promote the cause and principles of volunteerism: by her organization being hired to communicate a cause or

issue; by being invited to serve on a board; or via pro-volunteer advice she could give her clients.

Clara would say this to those who are volunteer coordinators today: "Nothing you do or learn is wasted. *Everything* is translatable. Haven't (you) seen that in volunteers?"

### **George Mountain**

George was a volunteer coordinator in two different geographical areas, then a trainer, consultant, writer and editor at state and national levels. His volunteerism career spanned 7-8 years, and ended through no fault or wish of his, via conditions beyond his control.

When I last talked with George 18 months ago, he was a District Manager of a dozen for-profit child care facilities. He was highly regarded in that role; I met his boss who asked me to let him know of any other volunteer coordinators seeking employment in the profit sector.

George believes his volunteerism experience definitely contributed to his current success, particularly in regard to management, personnel and training skills. He particularly plans to use his training skills in a vastly improved staff development program at the facilities he manages.

George has no particular plan to emphasize volunteers in his facilities, and only maintains relatively light contact with the general field of volunteerism, through a few close friends.

### **Renee Bright**

Renee was promoted from volunteer coordinator to Executive Director of a relatively small nonprofit human service agency. Though she no longer concentrates as much on direct volunteer program development, Renee feels the knowledge and skills she gained as a volunteer coordinator contribute importantly to her effectiveness as Executive Director. This is because volunteers are vital to the existence of this organization, in both service and policy roles.

Renee is still very active in the local association of volunteer coordinators; more active than ever, she says.

### **Dolores Thayer**

Dolores was volunteer coordinator at a

Crisis Center for five years. She still works with volunteers as Executive Director of the Center, though in a way she enjoys more: "As Executive Director, I have more indirect contact with volunteers. I enjoy that more, since the responsibility of their job descriptions and scheduling is with someone else."

Generally, Dolores feels her promotion from volunteer coordinator to Executive Director has brought more status, and much more challenge. She also gets more money now. Virtually all the direct client contact work of the Crisis Center is done by volunteer peer counselors. Obviously, the Executive Director of such an organization must understand the value of volunteers, be able to recognize their needs as well as their vital contributions to nonprofits. Dolores' experience as volunteer coordinator helped her with all this; indeed, it helped her get the job as Executive Director in the first place.

Dolores doesn't currently keep in touch with the volunteer leadership field but feels that (if invited), she could share two excellent volunteer-staffed programs she has developed. Her advice to volunteer coordinators: "Utilize your volunteers in developing new programs for the community. Thus, have them serve on the task force to determine needs, assist in developing a plan of action, as well as with funding ideas. Volunteers are committed individuals, but only if they have a sense of ownership in the program."

### **Diana Grant**

Diana recently "moved up" from volunteer coordinator to fundraiser in a nonprofit organization. She feels her volunteer coordinator experience will increase her effectiveness as a fundraiser, because volunteers are heavily relied on to help raise money in this organization.

Diana still attends local DOVIA meetings.

### **Candace Tennison**

Candace was first a volunteer coordinator for ten years in a Residential Treatment Center and a Residential Training Center. For the past five years she has been a recreational therapist at a large nursing home, working with individual residents, participating with an

inter-disciplinary patient care planning team, and coordinating the work of student interns in the recreation department.

She believes her volunteer coordinator experience may have helped her get the recreational therapist position. (However her original professional training was in Recreational Administration as well as Volunteer Administration.) She is quite clear that some experiences, skills and competencies from the earlier position were useful in the later one. Among these are skills in organizing and coordinating volunteer group projects, supervising volunteers in recreational activities, experience in working with college interns and their supervisors, participating on committees and inter-disciplinary teams, and writing progress reports. Indeed, many of the above functions are *identical* with activities on her present job, not just transferable to it.

Candace also applies her volunteer coordinator experience by expressing her views on volunteerism at Recreation Therapy staff meetings and with her supervisor. She does not keep in touch with the volunteerism field except for occasional reading of literature that comes her way.

Her advice to volunteer coordinators: "... seriously draw a line between being a committed, dedicated Director of Volunteer Services ... and a burned-out person seeking a second career. Learning to say no to some demands or expectations can perhaps prevent wearing one too many hats."

### **Jill Teacher**

Jill's volunteerism career included both local and statewide coordination in a human service agency, plus active leadership involvement in a professional association for volunteerism.

For personal reasons, she opted to move to a location where volunteerism involvement at her former level was no longer feasible or possible. She was, however, offered and accepted a statewide staff development role at a similar level of responsibility in the same state agency.

Jill has maintained active leadership participation in the volunteerism professional association and also seeks ways in

which her staff development work can prepare staff to work more effectively with volunteers.

### **Linda Christian**

Linda was a volunteer coordinator in health care for nine years. Now she's gone back to being one of the people she used to work with: a volunteer. Her recent volunteer positions have included church elder, and handling money for community events. She believes her volunteer coordinator experience has helped her here in such areas as planning and handling money, interviewing, and running meetings.

Linda has kept in touch with the volunteer leadership field. She's past president of a professional association, remains interested in encouraging better volunteer management and in promoting the proper use of volunteers.

### Partial Information on Eight Job Change Cases

This group consisted of six women and two men. Five left their jobs of their own free will; three were essentially forced out. Five remained in the non-profit sector; three moved to the for-profit workplace.

Main themes in their new areas of concentration are education and fund development, also public relations, financial planning, neighborhood organization, assistant to the president of a Community College, and proprietorship of a general store.

### B. Job Enlargement Case Studies:

#### **Barbara Stans**

For the past nine years, Barbara has been a Director of Volunteer Services (DVS) in a large institution. (Before that time she was for many years a volunteer at that institution.) As DVS, Barbara has developed a large, varied and effective volunteer program, earning widespread respect among both staff and volunteers.

Recently Barbara was promoted to "Institutional Community Relations Coordinator," receiving a substantial salary increase in the process. Though most still think of her as the Director of Volunteer Services, and though she does still spend

much of her time in that role, she now has a staff assistant to help with the volunteer program, and has branched out into areas such as:

- teaching some staff development classes;
- producing two monthly newsletters, one in-house for staff only, the other for a much larger circulation including staff, volunteers, and community friends;
- giving talks in the community on behalf of the institution, not just the volunteer program;
- encouraging and organizing the allocation of community gifts of money, food, clothes, and equipment;
- developing new programs, such as the one which ensures that there is a current photo on file of every institutional resident.

Barbara took the initiative in moving into these work areas, well before her new job title was confirmed. In other words, her de facto job enlargement was eventually ratified by top management.

There will probably be a steadily increasing emphasis on the newer duties, but Barbara will probably always keep some direct volunteer program involvement. Moreover she feels there is a community relations theme linking the original DVS with the newer duties.

*Author's Note:* Two other DVSs in the same state system have also made the transition to Institutional Community Relations Coordinator, but I do not know how similar the accompanying process was.

#### **Kilsey Smith**

Kilsey began work as a volunteer coordinator seven years ago, in an institution for disturbed children. She still has that role, but other job components have been added over the years. Among these are help with staff development; training and team-building; arranging facility tours; donor development and securing in-kind freebies from the community; perfecting data collection processes for the institution as a whole; and planning and preparation for accreditation of the institution.

Kilsey feels able to do all the additional things without undue strain or damage to the volunteer program, because of her in-

creasing mastery of basic volunteer program procedures. She is, however, advocating for some extra help with the volunteer program, as her role continues to enlarge. She is also currently negotiating with management for a job title more accurately reflecting the wider scope of her current duties; for example "Community Resource Coordinator" or "Human Resources Coordinator."

Whatever the title of her job eventually turns out to be, the pay is quite good. At \$30,000 it is the sixth highest in an agency of 160 staff, and considerably higher than some other department heads. While a reasonable conclusion would be that salary has grown with the job, Kilsey also feels that in part, the job has grown to justify the salary level.

Concurrent with this job enlargement within the institution, Kilsey has been increasingly active outside of it, as a trainer, consultant, process facilitator, board member, and professional association officer. In these roles, she is much respected statewide, and increasingly so beyond state borders as well. To make further room for growth in such involvements, Kilsey plans to ask management for 30 days leave without pay each year, in addition to her four weeks regular vacation time which is currently almost completely used up by these "outside activities."

### **Donna Welty**

Donna has coordinated volunteers at the Senior Center for four years. During that time the job has grown to the point where she also does program development and coordination (other than the volunteer program), specifically including the athletic program. She also has primary responsibility for management of the Senior Center's physical plant. Donna also still oversees the management of volunteers, but now she supervises another person who helps her with this.

Donna believes her experience and training in volunteer management enabled her to assume more management responsibilities within this organization; this includes specific skills such as budgeting, supervision and program development.

Donna's new title is "Program Coor-

dinator" and she is in fact second in command to the Director of the Senior Center. There has been a distinct increase in status and challenge for Donna in this job enlargement; not more money as yet, but signs are that this is in the works.

### **Miriam Menard**

Miriam has been a school volunteer coordinator for twelve years. She still does this but also administers a five-district cooperative support service for curriculum enrichment. This service operates like a small business, securing funding on a fee for service basis.

Miriam says this job enlargement has resulted in more status, money and challenge in her work.

### **Carrie Waverly**

For the past five years, Carrie has been statewide coordinator of volunteers in a public agency consisting of both institutions and field services. Carrie is still *the* sole person statewide concentrating on encouraging and providing technical assistance to volunteer programs in the agency. However, where religious programs formerly were handled quite separately from volunteers generally, Carrie now has an important supervisory role in such programs. This includes paid staff as well as volunteers; for example, responsibility for overseeing chaplaincy contracts. Another new challenge is supervising a Visitor Hospitality Center, again including some aspects beyond volunteerism.

Carrie notes that her job overall has become progressively more administrative, including attendance at "meetings, stacks and stacks of meetings." Neither job title nor pay has changed for Carrie.

### **Two Partially Relevant Job Enlargement Cases: Both Are Women**

One has been in the volunteer leadership field for 7 or 8 years, and currently divides her time between two divisions of the same overall local government agency. The agency, which thinks highly of her work, is seeking to create a new half-time staff development position for her. If this happens, she'll cut back to half-time as volunteer coordinator. She definitely sees this as career progress, and

much more fulfilling than her present position.

The other woman has mainly been a volunteer coordinator for several years until moving to her present agency. Here, she *began* in a position which was half-time volunteer coordinator, half-time Assistant Director (administration, budgeting, supervision, program planning). This "other job" helps her "preach the value of volunteerism." Together, she feels the combination has more status and challenge, than either would alone.

#### AFTER THOUGHTS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Clearly, this study should be expanded: more cases, more representatively selected and some more refined questions, too. But even further, there is need for more serious *thinking* about the nature and definition of a profession—even these preliminary results attest to that.

Both job change and job enlargement case studies strongly suggest that what is, for some, a finished profession is for many others a transitional occupation, a way station on the road to a more final destination; a training ground, a *phase* in professional growth, not the culmination of it. Insofar as this is so, we ought to be in far better touch with our graduates, for two important reasons: first, to see if our "preparation" was adequate, and how it might be improved; secondly, to see how they might help volunteerism (a kind of alumni offering).

Even as a way station on the road to somewhere else, there is some inkling the occupation may be incomplete as now defined—like a bird which is beautiful flying but has no song, or sings earth-

bound. The job enlargement people, seemed to me outstandingly competent and creative professionals in our field. In their job enlargement initiatives, I sense something more than a desire for more challenge, status, money. Though there was that, there seemed also an almost instinctive sense of incompleteness, a realization that the "people skills" and organizational skills required to lead a volunteer program have far wider application in most organizations, and that the imperfections of an overall organization lacking such attention will inevitably be reflected as imperfections in the volunteer programs as well. It is as if we taught some employees to be excellent marketers, trainers, communicators, and then insisted these talents be applied only to one segment of the organization's operations. This is in fact just the kind of thing we do with volunteer coordinators. We tend to say, apply your skills primarily to volunteers and the volunteer programs, not to staff, clients, boards, or other aspects of the organization. This is an unnatural restriction, in my view, and precisely what the job enlargement people are effectively surmounting. But they may be doing so largely unconscious of the general question raised for our profession: *Are* we a complete profession, as now defined, however excellent the range of skills we have, if we only apply these skills to one kind of worker in one segment of organizational operations?

If we do in fact need a more expansive definition of our profession, that could augur optimistically for its ultimate stability and fulfillingness. We need only to hold off a little longer those who would freeze the profession as it is defined right now.

# Appendix A

For former Volunteer Coordinators, or those who now also do many other things.

## MOVING ALONG

### A Survey of Job Enlargement and/or Job Change for Volunteer Coordinators

What happens to volunteer coordinators, consultants, or trainers when they no longer work exclusively in the volunteer leadership role? Please help with applicable information, anonymously if you wish.

1. Please give beginning and ending dates for your tenure as a coordinator or director of volunteers, or in a similar job by any other name.

From \_\_\_\_\_ 19\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_ 19\_\_\_\_  
(If still in that role, write "present" in latter space)

2. Are you still doing volunteer coordination work part of the time? \_\_\_\_\_
3. If yes, what are the main *other* things you do now? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. In what areas of human service were or are you employed as a coordinator? (Examples: health care, schools, community theatre, prisons) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. What were the main reasons for either the job change or "job enlargement"? (Now doing other things along with volunteer coordination) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

6. Do you have more status? money? challenge? now as a result of the job change or job enlargement? Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Answer the remaining questions only if you have had a *job change*; that is you are no longer working *directly* with volunteers as a volunteer coordinator/director.

7. Please describe briefly positions you have held since the job change.

a. \_\_\_\_\_ From \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ To \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_ From \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ To \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_ From \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ To \_\_\_\_\_



8. Do you still work with volunteers at all in your present job? \_\_\_\_\_  
In any of the other positions you have held since being a volunteer coordinator? \_\_\_\_\_

9. If yes, please describe this direct or indirect experience with volunteers.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

10. Did the experience, skills, or competencies acquired as a volunteer coordinator help you *get* any position since then? \_\_\_\_\_

11. If yes, which experiences, skills, competencies? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

12. Did the competencies acquired as a coordinator help you *perform* more effectively *once* in any other positions held since the job change? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

13. If so, which competencies in relation to which positions? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

14. Do you keep in touch with the volunteer leadership field at all? If so, how:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

15. Are there ways in which you promote the cause and principles of volunteerism where your work now? \_\_\_\_\_ If so, how? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

16. Now that you have the perspective of experience in other positions, what career advice would you offer a person who is currently a volunteer coordinator? (Use more space if you wish)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Signature (optional) \_\_\_\_\_

Address (optional) \_\_\_\_\_

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