

A NEW LOOK AT VOLUNTEERS

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In our Office of Continuing Education at Simmons, we have been offering counseling services to women who wish to make more productive use of their time, and we have counseled over 800 women, many of them over a long period of time. I would like to share with you some of the common attitudes that these women express, since many of you in the audience may be very much like them.

A majority of the women who come to discuss their plans with us are between 30 and 50 years old and have already been very active in their communities as volunteers, often in positions of responsibility. I'm sorry to have to tell you that the phrase we hear most often from these women is: "I've had it! The reason they feel this way, they say, is that after a certain number of years they begin to feel that "it doesn't add up to anything" - they feel fragmented and without focus for their activities. These are the women who are now thinking about going back to school or turning their energies toward getting a job or working as professionals.

I believe this trend is becoming more pronounced throughout the United States and we have to face the fact that ever increasing numbers of women are joining the labor force, thereby removing themselves from the ranks of the

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serious volunteers. President Kennedy's Commission of Women issued a report which shows that every third worker in America is a woman, and of these working women, 2/3 of them are married. The largest increase in the labor force over the last ten years - an increase including both men and women - has come from women over 40 years of age.

Another proof of this trend has come from a study done recently by the Women's Bureau of the U. S. Department of Labor. The study included 80,000 women college graduates who had been out of college for seven years, which would place them in the prime child rearing years. 51% of these women were already working, many of them part-time, and 80% of them said that they planned to work professionally.

It is obvious that those of you interested in strengthening the volunteer role cannot afford to ignore these facts. What is happening, and what will happen in the future, to organizations which depend on women volunteers to render their services? Some organizations hope that they will be able to replace the departing middle-aged volunteer with the woman whose family is still young, to keep these younger women for a few years and learn to live with the turn-over. Still others hope to recruit from different sources - teenagers, college students and retired people are now being used a great deal. Other organizations have begun to make paid positions out of jobs which were formerly done by volunteers. The director of a cooperative nursery told me recently that her school now has paid helpers on a list for mothers, who, because of job or educational commitments, do not put in their mother-help time themselves but pay people to

take their places. Some of you may belong to churches which have begun to pay their Sunday School teachers, a job which for many years has been done by volunteers. Already the nurse's aide of World War II has become a paid position in most hospitals. People are now wondering if paid Girl Scout leaders and Den Mothers are not just around the corner.

As an aside, I would like to call your attention for a minute to some of the larger implications of these developments in a democratic form of government, because volunteering seems to be a characteristic somewhat unique in our Western countries. I was running a seminar in Boston on volunteer work which was attended by a woman guest visiting from Latin America. She listened attentively for a while, and then she broke in with a great air of amazement: "Do I understand correctly that you have women in this country who leave their own homes, and without pay go into the hospitals and read to the patients and things like that?" We assured her that we did, and asked her who did such things in her country. She told us that either the government did them or else they did not get done; the tradition there was so different that she could hardly grasp the concept of our volunteer tradition. I think we should be aware of how many of our cultural and service activities are in the hands of private rather than government agencies, and how much the continuation of this tradition depends on the use of volunteers. Now public agencies are beginning to realize that they also can use citizens in volunteer capacities, and some are hiring volunteer directors and actively recruiting women.

I guess I can assume that most of you believe that volunteering is important or else

you wouldn't be here today. You may have to accept that some jobs which were formerly voluntary will become paid jobs or have already become so, but there is still plenty of work to be done. I think one of the major problems you have to tackle is how to recruit and use volunteers more effectively so that women will find real satisfaction in making a commitment to this work. I feel sure that many of the women we counsel would not be leaving volunteer capacities for schools and jobs if they had been able to find satisfaction in the things they were doing. Many of them do not really need the money, but are looking for ways to use themselves more fully. Why are they dissatisfied?

Freda Goldman of Boston University has made an analysis of the satisfactions that women find in paid employment which they often do not find in volunteer work. She has identified three aspects which I would like to explore with you. They are: first, productivity in society; second, a sense of commitment; and third, a sense of personal identity. If you think about these satisfactions, you realize that they are built into even the most routine paid job. A woman who is a clerk in an office feels that she is part of the mainstream of the world's work and is producing something which her employer needs enough to hire her. She has a commitment, in this case based on the fact that she is receiving money and must come to work and earn it. She also has an identity which has a name - she is a clerk - which she and other people in her life recognize.

Compare this with a poorly run volunteer effort. A woman may report to an agency which really doesn't have enough for her to do, or where the professional staff resents her presence.

Another type of volunteer may be doing what is really "busy work" or attending endless committee meetings. One woman told me that she finally terminated a long association with an organization after spending one hour at a meeting deciding what food to have at their next function. How productive can these women feel? This feeling of wasted time is much more common among volunteers than is generally recognized.

In regard to commitment, many serious volunteers find themselves the only persons in their organizations who assume real responsibility and follow through on what they say they will do. Even a woman who feels her contribution is important can become demoralized when others have only a half-hearted commitment and fail to show if something a little more interesting comes along that day. Many organizations do not demand real commitment from their workers, and people are free to go off to Florida for a vacation without making any prior arrangements, something that is unheard of in paid jobs. They come to feel it isn't really important whether they follow through or not--they are perhaps not really needed.

Mrs. Goldman's third point, a sense of personal identity, is what I believe is most lacking with volunteers. Often they do different tasks for different organizations, but they can not give themselves a name or a job description, and other people do not perceive them as having a clear work identity. I find that this problem is most apt to arise at the stage when children are beginning to leave the home. A woman acquires a great deal of personal identity as a mother, and when this role decreases she tends to look for a new identity in the larger community. The fact that so many women say they

end up feeling "fragmented" by volunteer work shows that we are not satisfying this need for personal identity in the way we have been using volunteers.

I would like to tell you briefly about how a few Boston agencies are using volunteers in a way which seems to give women the kinds of satisfactions they hope to get in paid jobs. These volunteers are doing what I call "direct service," which I have observed is another new trend among volunteer workers. Women who have participated in political work have always had a feeling of direct participation. But in the past, many women wished to associate only with their own friends, perhaps in supporting and raising money for community agencies. More women now want to work directly with the people the agency is serving.

Three mental hospitals in the Boston area have instituted a program of case aides. A woman working as an aide is required to guarantee a certain amount of time over a long period -- perhaps two mornings a week for nine months -- to work with one mental patient. She is given training for this task by a professional social worker, she is supervised throughout the year, and she continues to attend training seminars. She builds a strong relationship with her patient, and since the patients assigned to aides are usually people who could leave the hospital if they could develop contacts with the community, she often helps the patient make arrangements and adjustments to leaving the hospital. The aide often follows the patient after discharge. The hospitals report that as a result of this program, several dozen chronic patients have been released successfully.

The Massachusetts Council for Public Schools has another successful program for what they call School Volunteers. These women are trained by professional teachers and, again, supervised on the job. They are placed in classrooms in the crowded inner-city schools to give individual attention to children who need it. One woman spent two weeks, three mornings a week, simply being with and being friendly to a new Puerto Rican child who could not speak English. Others work with small groups, or help set up libraries in schools where there are none.

The City Missionary Society in Boston has been using volunteers as relocation aides, to help families which have been uprooted by urban renewal projects. Trained and supervised by a social worker, the women do anything which is needed by these families, from helping them to buy more efficiently to taking their children to the clinic.

Notice that in all these new programs, professional staff time is used in order to use the volunteers more effectively. When such training and supervision is provided, there is no question about the women feeling needed and productive, or about their feeling they have an obligation and a commitment to the people they are helping. Notice, too, that these jobs have a name and a description, making them almost sub-professional jobs and providing a strong sense of identity.

I suggest that the agencies and the organizations represented here today should think of using their volunteers with these aspects in mind if they wish to attract and keep the kind of women who in the past have been the mainstay of their efforts. Women today have many more opportunities open to them, particularly the lure of

paid employment, and what they are saying is that they want to use their time and energy for endeavors which have real significance.

It is interesting that in communities where there are real needs which have been unmet, women are still responding by giving their time, and many who have never been active before are becoming so. This is particularly true in the poverty areas in Boston, where people who formerly had the attitude "you can't fight City Hall" are now demanding to be heard. A few years ago just a handful of mothers in Roxbury organized the parents to provide bussing for their children to other schools in the city which were less crowded and had better education. Once the parents became involved, they began to take an interest in all aspects of their schools and in other problems in their neighborhoods. Although "Operation Exodus" started as a bussing operation, it has provided leadership and ways for citizens to act effectively on their own behalf. The Poverty agency in Boston, called ABCD, has tried to encourage this trend toward citizen participation. They are using residents of poverty areas, many of them housewives, as Neighborhood Aides, rather than sending in workers from outside the community. The Aides are paid, but much of their work involves organizing the residents on a volunteer basis to bring about necessary changes. I would say that this type of volunteering is still very much alive and growing, and is closer to political activity than the type of agency and organization work which I was discussing before.

I have deliberately focused on the woman volunteer because I felt this would be of most interest to this particular audience. There are many men who give time in the evenings,

and I have already referred to the increased use of young people and retired people. Some of these volunteers and some women may not wish to look upon themselves as serious, "career volunteers," but desire a more casual commitment. There are certainly places for them, too, if you have carefully assessed how they can be used.

In conclusion I would like to say that I don't think we can continue in the old, established ways. We must re-evaluate all our programs to be sure they are not just vested interests but are of real significance to society. And most of all, we must take an honest and realistic look at who the volunteers are. Our challenge and our responsibility is to find and develop ways in which the work which needs to be done can be shaped to meet the diverse human needs of volunteer workers.