

## **VOLUNTEER-STAFF RELATIONS\***

by

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There is evidence of a grave concern now existent in volunteer programs throughout our country. Coordinators or directors of volunteers seem to be increasingly aware of the serious problems which can and do develop between volunteers and paid staff members.

This has become particularly apparent in the last few years. For instance, at a workshop on self-renewal, during an annual conference of the American Association of Volunteer Services Coordinators, men and women who work with volunteers spoke of experiences where administrators (and often staff) were saying to them, in effect, "Since we have to have volunteers, keep them out of my hair," or "Just do your job, but don't bother me."

Later, at the same conference, which was attended by coordinators from all over the nation, a list was made of the 4 major problem areas (according to their importance) which the coordinators face in their day-by-day work with volunteers in agencies and institutions. They were:

administration

staff

involving volunteers in programs after 5:00 p.m.

attending administrative meetings

It is certainly significant that 3 out of 4 pertained to administration and staff problems.

At a recent conference for coordinators of volunteers in California, workshops were held to consider such areas

as administration, supervision, training, and so forth. In all of these, the recorded notes reflected a reoccurring theme: problems with volunteer-staff relations.

In "The State of the Art", a 3 year study by the Goodwill Industries, published in 1971 and financed by a special grant from HEW, several points are significant as they relate to volunteers in rehabilitation facilities.

"The attitudes of executive directors and administrators toward volunteer participation show a definite increase toward the positive as the level of volunteer program development increases:",<sup>1</sup>

They found that the "Average attitudinal scores are highest for executive directors and administrators of facilities having volunteer programs classified as above average in organizational development."<sup>2</sup> In other words, the better developed the program, the more positive are the attitudes of administration.

The question then is, how do you get to the point of having a well developed volunteer program, if the administrator isn't backing the program? Doesn't this carry over to staff attitudes, also?

There were 2 other tables of questionnaire responses in "The State of the Art" study which should also be mentioned here: reasons for never involving volunteers in an institution's program, and reasons for discontinuing a volunteer program in an institution.

In non-hospital rehabilitative facilities, 52% of the administrators whose programs fell within the above 2 categories, said that volunteers were "unreliable" and 32% said that volunteers were "not worth the bother".<sup>3</sup>

Let us look at the public sector for a moment. Currently, all states are required to have a director of volunteers, counties within many states have volunteer programs, and there are federal volunteer programs run

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<sup>1</sup> Goodwill Industries of America, Inc., *The State of the Art: Volunteering in Rehabilitation Facilities*, October, 1971, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> IBID, P. 41

<sup>3</sup> IBID, P. 22

nationally as well as within individual states. Here we are talking about county, state or federal government employees as administration and/ or staff.

From the beginning, negative volunteer-staff relations cannot help but exist when the staff is *told* but *not involved* in the decision-making, as these laws are passed forcing departments to involve volunteers in programs.

I suggest there is a logical reason for concern about relationships among those who work with a volunteer program, private or public.

At this point, may we agree that there *are* problems in evidence between volunteers and staff. May we also agree, for the purpose of this discussion, on the definition of volunteers: that the volunteers, about whom we are speaking, are involved in direct service (*doing with*), not impersonal service (*doing for*).

Now, what can be done, in specific ways, to develop positive volunteer-staff relationships?

## ACCEPTANCE OF VOLUNTEERS

Two things occurred at Sunny Hills, in the last year which can be used as illustrations of positive changes toward staff acceptance of volunteers in a facility. Sometimes there is a lot more involved in the terminology we use in this business than meets the eye. At the beginning of 1971, I began referring to the volunteers at Sunny Hills as the 'volunteer staff'. This was done verbally, in memos, reports, etc. It began to catch on among the paid staff, with reactions such as "Oh, you mean the volunteers on the *staff*. I thought you were referring to just the volunteers." When the paid staff realized the volunteers were on the 'agency staff' it made a tremendous difference in their attitude toward the volunteers. Simply by adding the word 'staff', when speaking of the volunteers, helped make this difference.

Another word became significant in the volunteer program at Sunny Hills. It was apparent that many paid

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<sup>1</sup> Sunny Hills Children's Services: A residential treatment center for adolescent boys and girls with severe emotional and behavioral problems, San Anselmo, California.

staff member's attitudes toward the value of volunteer contributions to the agency program were based upon the strict meaning of the word 'use' when referring to volunteers. In other words, 'using volunteers' was just that, in many cases. I decided that the word should be eliminated from our vocabulary. I began a campaign to substitute 'involve' in place of 'use' and after many months, paid staff at Sunny Hills could be heard correcting themselves. It may seem a minor point, but attitudinal changes have really been apparent on the paid staff's part. *Involving* a volunteer in their particular part of the program means something entirely different to them than *using* a volunteer in a particular program.

These two changes in attitude have provided opportunities for a greater 'team' development between paid staff and volunteers, further enabling the paid staff to think in terms of volunteer ability rather than merely volunteer value in dollars and cents and time.

Maybe you have noted that there is one word which I do not use, when discussing volunteer-staff relationships. That is, I do not refer to paid staff as 'professional' as a way of distinguishing them from volunteers. As far as I am concerned, everyone on the staff at Sunny Hills is a professional, whether they are paid or not paid. In stating this, I am not referring to 'professional', for example, as a former teacher who is now teaching at the agency without pay. I mean, any volunteer involved in the Sunny Hills program is a professional in that he or she brings a skill, an expertise, a knowledge or training in some area which he can offer to the emotionally disturbed teenagers at Sunny Hills through his relationship with them.

Very much involved in paid staff acceptance of volunteers is the coordinators responsibility to help them be more *sensitive* to the direct needs which volunteers can fulfill. At Sunny Hills, I spend as much, if not more time, working with the paid staff to help them learn how to work with the volunteer staff. When I first began the direct service volunteer program at Sunny Hills, I spent my time helping the volunteers learn how to work with our youngsters and our paid staff. I learned very quickly that there was another side to this coin.

When the paid staff is sensitive to potential areas for volunteer involvement, it helps define recruitment for the coordinator of volunteers. Let us think of it in terms of

a circle. Sensitiveness sets up possibilities for a wider variety of volunteer staff jobs, which in turn increases the number of volunteers and volunteer hours, which in turn allows paid staff to see volunteers performing a wider variety of needed jobs, which in turn encourages them to be more sensitive to further possibilities for volunteers in the program.

Once again, may I use an example from my experiences at Sunny Hills. Two and a half years ago, because of various problems present in program changes and staff turnover, I called a moratorium on volunteers (with the approval of the executive director). We did not add new volunteers to the staff for nearly 8 months. During this period, considerable time was spent in helping paid staff understand why this seemingly negative approach was necessary. Paid staff began to understand that value of those volunteers remaining on the staff. They began to understand that volunteers really should not be considered baby-sitters; that if they were to have one or more volunteers involved in their particular part of the agency program, some input and involvement was necessary on their part, and that it was important for them to consider the time spent by the volunteers with the youngsters just as significant as the rest of the time each youngster spent in residential treatment at Sunny Hills. There were even times when I said to a paid staff member, "I don't think you're ready for a volunteer yet," and then tried to help him reach that point.

Happily, this moratorium on volunteers resulted in positive changes among paid staff attitudes and we had more volunteers, with more volunteer hours contributed that year than previously, despite the moratorium.<sup>5</sup>

It is very important for paid staff to understand that volunteers are there to *supplement not supplant*. Orientation for paid staff should definitely include the volunteer program. They should realize from the beginning that they will be seeing volunteers around, if not working with them; that volunteers are not *free* (in that paid staff time is very much involved) but they *do free* the paid staff for greater service to their clients. As an article in the Child Welfare League of America quarterly publication stated, "That

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<sup>5</sup> In 1971, direct service volunteers jobs increased by 33% over 1970, with an increase of 565% in volunteer hours for a total of 108 volunteers contributing 5,280 hours.

volunteers do not receive financial payment does not mean that their services cost nothing.”<sup>6</sup> Administration needs to understand this, too, so that it does not assume that the coordinator or director of volunteers is the only one on the paid staff who should spend time with volunteers.

## EXPECTATIONS OF PAID STAFF

Very much involved in acceptance is the paid staff's *expectations* for volunteers. It is not hard to find references to problems in this area. “Expectations of staff seem to be unrealistically higher for volunteers than for their professional colleagues. They have a way of remembering, forever, a not-so-good volunteer, and conveniently forgetting about the trained worker they once had who was touchy, know-it-all and took half-hour coffee breaks.”<sup>7</sup>; “...some of our volunteers were kicked off the wards for getting in the way. The Social Workers said they couldn't be bothered. The Recreation staff hadn't had time to work out their own program patterns. And so it went. Throughout the hospital.”<sup>8</sup>

Since expectations vary from one facility to another, obvious questions arise in reading these 2 quotations. Does the paid staff expect baby-sitters, stamp lickens, etc.? If so, does the paid staff accept these volunteer jobs as important? Does their attitude reflect this? Or, do they expect more than that but don't provide the opportunities? Perhaps they say they want greater volunteer involvement with their clients but set it up for the volunteers to fail.

What is important is that the expectations of the paid staff at a facility are well defined and then either mutually accepted, or changed. Without definite expectations, a volunteer program cannot develop and grow. Instead, it may flounder and possibly die. It should be the job of the coordinator or director of a volunteer program to encourage realistic expectations among paid staff and administration.

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth M. Cantor, “The Challenge of Volunteer Services”, *Child Welfare*, Volume XLVII, Number 9, November 1968, p. 539.

<sup>7</sup> Volunteer Bureau, United Community Services, “Workers Without Pay Who Pay Off,” Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1969, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Sidney Zweig, C.V.C., *Volunteer Administration*, Volume V, Number 1, March, 1971, p. 2.

I mentioned earlier the involvement of paid staff time (input) in any volunteer program. May I also pose some questions for your consideration in this area of paid staff attitudes.

How do you justify the amount of time you and other paid staff members spend working with the volunteers? Where do you draw the line? Is it worth the input? What are you in the business for: helping clients through a volunteer program, or providing a way for people in the community to volunteer? As to this last question, neither is right or wrong. Both might be important. What is needed here is to be aware of which is the case for your facility.

Naturally, some volunteers are going to require more paid staff time than others. Those who need more should be looked at as to their value-in-return. When the effort is worth it, then the paid staff needs the help of the coordinator to see this as an important aspect of their job. Otherwise, negative attitudes among paid staff, such as 'wasted time' or 'another volunteer failure' can develop and become contagious much more rapidly, I'm sorry to say, than positive attitudes which are built up over the years.

It is also important for the paid staff to realize that they need to spend time with you, as the coordinator, to help ensure your understanding of the type of volunteer required to fill a client's specific needs. This kind of communication is very important for successful volunteer placement. "Get me a Big Brother for John" is obviously not an adequate amount of information nor should it be acceptable to the coordinator of volunteers.

## *VOLUNTEER — PAID STAFF TEAMWORK*

With acceptance come all kinds of possibilities. All kinds of doors will open. It then becomes alright for volunteers to be involved in staff meetings because they are a part of the agency staff. It then is possible for them to be in on case discussions, to handle confidentially, to enter into policy making and program changes.

As I indicated earlier, paid staff then see the necessity for feedback from the volunteers. "What's happening to our client when he's with you?" "What do you see through your relationships that maybe we don't see in ours?"

Methods can then be established for the feedback process to take place. This also provides the volunteer with a feeling that what he does is of value because someone is listening to what he has to say.

Honesty and trust enter the picture here, too. If a volunteer is included as a part of the agency team, if he is helped to understand what the agency is trying to do, if he is encouraged to participate in working toward program goals, then a climate is established which is conducive to *trust* on both the part of the paid staff and volunteer staff. There cannot be one without the other. Trust cannot develop where paid staff considers volunteers as second rate people. It can develop where paid staff wants volunteers to be identifiable members of the same working team. Most volunteers appreciate and need to have honest feedback from the paid staff as to how they are performing in their job. Just-tolerating volunteers should be replaced by open and honest evaluation, suggestion, information and promotion.

The role or relationship between the paid staff and the volunteer staff changes in other ways, too, as the volunteer program grows. Paid staff (other than the coordinator) become involved in orientation, training, screening, evaluation, development of more volunteer job possibilities, and so forth. If the paid staff begin to see themselves (or each other) in these roles, then the methods and techniques used in developing a 'team' won't be difficult to discover and develop.

It is helpful to start these 'doors opening' by picking out a key member on the paid staff who has a *feeling* for working with volunteers. Start slowly to involve him. Then, as other paid staff see positive things happening, they will want to 'have a piece of the action'. I have used this technique repeatedly at Sunny Hills in various areas of the agency program. Most recently it was used in our school program, where we had a number of new teachers last fall who were not ready or able to involve volunteer classroom aides. By working with one teacher over a period of time, she was finally ready for a volunteer in her classroom. Soon she could handle another and then another. Some very exciting volunteer relationships developed with the youngsters. As a result, other teachers began dropping by my office to request volunteers for their classrooms.



Also, with attitudinal changes comes the realization that volunteers need not be a *threat*.

How often have you heard words similar to this? "I've spent six years studying and training for this job. How can a volunteer possibly work alongside me?"

This is not uncommon in hospitals, schools, treatment centers, any facility where highly trained paid staff members work directly with clients.

Quite frankly, I would much rather place a volunteer without teaching credentials in a classroom at Sunny Hills. We have the necessary teachers. What we really need is a 'human being' who likes teenagers, who wants to spend time with them and who has some understanding of their kinds of emotional problems. Of course, this is an easy way to avoid the threat of volunteers for our teachers. Other parts of our program are different, however, and threat isn't that easily handled. Again, working with one member of the paid staff who isn't easily threatened is an excellent way of showing others it can work for them, too.

Fortunately, the trend today is to help students, particularly those studying for MSW degrees, learn how to involve volunteers in their profession once they are employed. This should become evident in institutions within the near future, hopefully.

## **THE COORDINATOR'S ROLE**

In any discussion of problems with volunteer-staff relations, the coordinator finds himself in-the-middle. To make that position less vulnerable, and more workable, there are a few things which are important to keep in mind.

Volunteers should not be forced upon the paid staff, nor should the coordinator make unilateral decisions as to the placement of volunteers in the program. Open communication is a must between the coordinator and the rest of the paid staff.

Often, coordinators think in terms of a volunteer position as a specific task. Rather, I suggest it is much more effective to start with the person: the client, the

staff member, the volunteer. In meeting the needs of all three, the task then becomes the method, not the motive. Focusing on individual-personal needs in this way enables 'what do I want' grow into 'what do we want' and the result is a team effort among all those involved.

*Flexibility and creativity* is to be encouraged among both paid and volunteer members of the staff if a volunteer program is to grow and clients needs are to be met. That is the way new volunteer jobs are created, and it is certainly one way paid staff can be freed to give broader and more effective service.

A lot of words have been mentioned in this discussion of volunteer-staff relations:

ACCEPTANCE

INVOLVEMENT

SENSITIVITY

ATTITUDE

SUPPLEMENT

EXPECTATION

TRUST

HONESTY

FLEXIBILITY

CREATIVITY

May I suggest that they are not just words, but very important concepts for a coordinator or director of volunteers to be aware of as they relate to how the agency program and paid staff members are affected by the involvement of volunteers.