

# The Effective Use of the Retired Volunteer

By Tom MacLeod

*For the purposes of this paper, a retired volunteer is defined as "an older individual who works as a volunteer in the delivery of direct services in a social service agency." The effective use and management of this valuable volunteer resource begins in the planning process of an agency.*

## PLANNING

When an agency's planning process has identified a service need and set goals and objectives for its provision, the method chosen for the provision of service may be more staff. That staff may be older volunteers. Once this decision is made, volunteer job descriptions must be created.

Job descriptions for older volunteers involve the same criteria as for any paid job description. The volunteer can expect to know what his title is, what his role is and who he is responsible to in the organization, what he is expected to do, what hours he is to work and for what term, what support he can expect from the agency in performing his job, and how his performance will be evaluated. Some aspects of designing the job will need to be done with the older person in mind.

Normal physiological changes dictate that jobs requiring long hours of standing, heavy lifting or reaching are not generally suitable for older volunteers. As well, psychological changes should also be considered in designing volunteer jobs for this group. Bromley writes, "as age advances the difference between optimum and maximum levels of performance decreases, older people therefore have reduced reserves." (Bromley, 1977) When older volunteers perform functions where the work demand is unpredictable and can escalate quickly, it is important to build in sufficient back-up support to allow them to perform to their optimum.

In order for the volunteer to plan his time and the agency to plan its services, the volunteer jobs must have specific hours and specific length or terms of commitment.

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A second benefit of preset terms of commitment is that they allow the older volunteer to work and contribute within a staff structure without feeling he is embarking on another twenty-year career. As each term ends, the volunteer should have the opportunity to renegotiate his present job or to apply for another job or to decide to spend his time in entirely different pursuits. This luxury of choice is one of the great attractions of volunteering and should be preserved as much as possible.

## RECRUITMENT

The goal of volunteer recruitment is to get qualified individuals to apply for volunteer positions within an agency. In order to do this, the agency must market its volunteering program. Kotler writes, "Exchange is the central concept of marketing." (Kotler, 1975) The agency must be prepared to offer the volunteer something in exchange for his labors.

A volunteer job that provides a function which is seen as useful by an older volunteer can help to provide that volunteer with a sense of self-worth through a feeling of social utility. The agency then can offer the opportunity to be useful in exchange for the older volunteer's work.

When Age and Opportunity Centre, Inc. changed its volunteer recruitment approach from printing a laundry list of its needs, asking anyone to help, to offering a targeted retired population an opportunity to use their specific skills, an increase in response from qualified older applicants occurred.

## PLACEMENT INTERVIEW: Establishing a Volunteer Contact

An essential component of the placement interview is the establishment of a mutually-beneficial, contractual concept of volunteering; that is to say an agreement whereby a volunteer offers to give an item(s) of value to the agency in return for an item(s) of value from the agency. These items must be clearly identified and agreed upon.

As this concept of mutual benefit is established, the volunteer placement interview assumes the aspects of a paid-job

interview. The applicant will have the opportunity to determine if the job is of interest and value to him, while the agency interviewer must attempt to determine if the applicant has the skills and aptitude for the job.

When interviewing an older retired individual for a volunteer position, the interviewer should take into consideration characteristics common to this group. Older individuals often know how to do a job but not how to apply for it. Many who have performed successfully in paying jobs for long periods of time have had little experience in articulating their strengths and aspirations in an interview setting. Others may have lost their confidence in their ability to perform. For these reasons, the interviewer must be prepared to ask for information usually volunteered by applicants. Examples of such questions are "What are your most recent accomplishments?"; "What approach do you use at work?"; "What do you like doing best?"; "What do you feel most suited to now?" The results of this process help the interviewer decide whether or not to place the volunteer.

#### JOB FLEXIBILITY

Job flexibility can play a major role in the placement interview, and relates directly to the principle of not putting a round peg in a square hole. An older individual not interested in or suited for one volunteer position may be just right in another one. If an agency has the resources to be flexible, alternative volunteer jobs should be available and discussed during the placement interview. Older volunteers who balk at reducing their free time by giving a lengthy commitment to a volunteer job, or those who would like to test out their skills before accepting the responsibility of a year-long job might be pleased to accept a short-term proposition or a set probationary period.

Age and Opportunity Centre, Inc. has been successful in placing older volunteers on an on-call basis where their skills are used in appropriate, one-shot, time-limited programs. Examples are the organization and administration of free income tax clinics or gathering resource material for handouts at a conference.

#### ORIENTATION AND TRAINING

The challenges of maximizing the human resources of older volunteer employees closely parallel those of any part-time staff. Because most of the volunteers will function in a job in one department of an agency, they will have little opportunity to be exposed to an overview of the total agency's role in their daily work, therefore, it is important that their orientation to the agency provides that overview. It must enable

the new volunteer to make sense out of their work role relative to the whole agency. The orientation should be well-planned and have measurable learning goals. It should provide the new volunteers with written teaching material to fall back on. Agency and/or program orientation manuals can serve this purpose.

Skill training per se is generally not practical for volunteer positions, however, the volunteer must be trained in using his skills within his new volunteer job. A volunteer typist would not be hired without basic typing skills, but orientation to a particular typewriter, the style and set-up or agency documents, and other office details is necessary. A volunteer working in a counseling department, providing information on housing for the elderly, needs to bring communication and interviewing skills with him to the job, but he may have to learn about housing problems of the elderly, housing available, and referral systems.

The training process of an older volunteer should recognize the experience the volunteer brings to the job. Training should promote a feeling of worthwhile accomplishment for the volunteer, an essential ingredient of job satisfaction for any worker. Maintaining job satisfaction for the volunteer is an on-going task of the agency.

#### SUPERVISION AND EVALUATION

Communication between a volunteer and his staff supervisor must be structured. That structure must be firmly adhered to because the opportunity for informal information exchange is limited by the part-time nature of volunteer jobs. Often a volunteer's input will bring results when they are not at work; if they are going to accrue satisfaction from their accomplishments they must be aware of the results.

Evaluation must also take place on an on-going scheduled basis. Overall program evaluation must include input from the volunteers, with the results fed back to the volunteers. This process again reinforces and legitimizes the role of the volunteer.

Individual volunteer performance evaluation is usually welcomed by the older volunteer.

At a time when his role in life is changing and the norms are becoming blurred, it is especially important to an older volunteer to know if he is doing a good job in the eyes of others. The performance evaluation will identify factors in the work situation which are promoting and/or restricting the volunteer's functioning or development. It will assess the individual against understood standards of performance. If the volun-

teer does not meet these standards and further support or training is not available, practical, or successful, the volunteer must be asked to leave his job. The volunteer should have the opportunity to explore other volunteer opportunities which may be appropriate.

#### RECOGNITION

Formal recognition is another integral part of the successful management of volunteers. Daily informal recognition should be augmented with formal recognition events. Such events give the agency an opportunity to express its appreciation and provide the part-time volunteer staff an opportunity to meet with one another on a social basis and learn about the scope of volunteer involvement outside their own departments.

Finally, some feedback from an older volunteer at a recognition reception: "You know, it's nice to get together like this and for the agency to show its appreciation, but I have worked in volunteer

jobs where if I didn't show up it didn't matter and nobody noticed or cared. Here I know if I don't show up and work hard somebody isn't going to get the service they need. For the agency to trust us with this responsibility is the sincerest form of recognition." I believe that this is the key to a successful volunteer program.

#### REFERENCES

Bromley, D. B., The Psychology of Human Aging. Penguin Books, 2nd edition, 1977.

Kotler, Philip. Marketing for Non-Profit Organizations. Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975, p. 5.

Age and Opportunity Centre, Inc. is a non-profit, social service agency working with the well elderly of Winnipeg, Manitoba. The examples used in this paper are taken from experiences in the agency.