

# Volunteers, Computers Have Finally Met

by Helga Roth

The computer, like other sophisticated technologies, evokes a host of feelings in people: fear of its poorly understood potential; hopes that it will be a panacea for problems; hostility and enmity because of its vaunted role in "dehumanizing" society. Small wonder that the volunteer world, which considers itself a bastion of humaneness, has been in no hurry to investigate how the computer might serve its purposes.

Four Voluntary Action Centers have, however, broken the ice and are now using computers in different ways to improve the effectiveness of their operations.

**The Los Angeles VAC** uses the computer as a superior file clerk to maintain a voluminous directory of local agencies that involve volunteers in their programs. The list, presently numbering more than 1,300 agencies, is coded according to a system worked out by volunteers under the direction of administrative director Ralph Wright.

The code allows four different printouts: agencies in alphabetical order; agencies by the types of service they provide (e.g. adoption); types of skills and volunteer job categories agencies need; zip codes which give geographical groupings of agencies to be consulted when volunteers wish to work within their neighborhoods. Volunteer job placement interviewers work with these four books when they answer phone calls from potential volunteers. Masterfile and printouts are put on microfiche to make them

available to other agencies.

The printouts go through an updating every two months. Numerical codes indicate whether each agency wants a limited number of volunteers in a job category or if it has a large demand. If there is any doubt, the interviewer can call the agency to see whether a particular job, which looks suitable for the person calling, is still open.

The system works, and has proven to be a valuable asset to a big-city, multiagency operation like Los Angeles. It is presently under review for possible use by the Information and Referral Service. A manual with the categories Wright worked out is available from the VAC for \$4.00, and a detailed outline of the system is in preparation.

**The New Orleans VAC's** "Project Volunteer," in which the computer is used to match volunteer skills to service opportunities, has been in the making for two years. A great deal of work went in to the design of the detailed questionnaires which go to the volunteer and to the organization involving volunteers. The questionnaire categorizes volunteer skills, notes preferences for types of service and time available, and develops a brief profile of the volunteer's background. There is a dizzying 27,800 possible volunteer, organization combinations.

Using computer time donated by the bank next door, the VAC uses the computer printout to make referrals personally. VAC director Frances Bordelon says getting in touch with the potential volunteer is often a problem, but she feels that a telephone interview is necessary for a satisfactory referral.

Although the project is just underway and the computer matching has been run only three times, Mrs. Bordelon expressed satisfaction with the program and emphasized that wide distribution of the questionnaire booklets has helped to reach agencies and people who were not involved with volunteerism before the start of "Project Volunteer."

The computer program of the **Greensboro, N.C. VAC** started with an annual booklet compiled by the Greensboro Public Library, listing all local clubs and organizations. Members of the VAC board of directors worked with the library staff to formulate a questionnaire giving the library the information it needed for its annual directory and providing expanded data for the VAC. The information was coded and put on the computer to be matched against information from agencies around the community which offer opportunities for volunteer

group projects. Requests for projects large and small may now be filled with a maximum of ease.

**The Portland, Or., VAC** projects that its computer system, which is funded by a grant from the Junior League of Portland and the United Good Neighbors, will be fully operative by about January 1, 1975. The system will be similar to that of the Los Angeles VAC, for maintenance of various agency directories. Volunteer interviewers will use the computer data to advise and counsel potential volunteers.

In addition, the computer will yield statistics on how many volunteers are involved, distribution of ages, sexes, occupation, etc, and will record the referral process providing the VAC with a management tool to evaluate its own operation as well as the operation of the volunteer programs of its registered agencies.

The VAC requests that questions about the new system be held off till after the first of the year.

The four Voluntary Action Centers mentioned here are not alone in their pioneer use of the computer. Volunteers for International Technical Assistance (VITA) has been using a computerized data bank to match its volunteers to needs around the world since 1972. The Los Angeles Volunteer Corps Program plans to computerize its volunteer skillbank, and will use the camera-ready printouts in their newly launched Ways and Means publication, "A Journal of Citizen Participation In Los Angeles."

For more information on these computer systems, you may write to:

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