

# As I See It

## The Changing Profession of Volunteer Administration

By Laura Lee M. Geraghty



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**W**HEN ASKED TO BE PLACED ON THE BALLOT for president-elect of the Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA), I agreed because of my long-standing commitment to the profession of volunteer administration and my belief that, as a professional, I had a responsibility outside of my own program to the larger volunteer community.

I believe that all volunteer administrators need to address some important questions that impact our profession:

- What can we do individually and collectively to improve the "professionalism" in our field?
- What responsibilities do we have to ourselves or other volunteer leaders as professionals?
- What responsibilities do we have to serve as advocates for volunteerism?
- What actions can we take to improve our field and to

ensure the continuation of volunteerism for future generations?

Historically, the profession of volunteer administration often has been misunderstood, particularly by those outside the field. Much of this is due to a lack of professional identity for both paid and unpaid volunteer administrators.

With our nation's long history of citizen involvement, there is also a strong history of volunteer leadership. However, until fairly recently volunteer administration has not been recognized as a separate and distinct profession requiring specialized skills, talents and experiences.

Volunteer administration is relatively new as a paid profession. Most of us currently working in the field were not trained or educated to be volunteer administrators. Instead, we were prepared for careers in other fields, such as social work, nursing, corrections, teaching and as ministers, environmentalists, business managers, etc. This often has created a conflict in professional identity (i.e., volunteer administrator or corrections professional, or park worker, or corporate manager). Most often we are the only one, or one of very few, in our organization who has the job of volunteer administrator.

In addition, specific training, publications and other resources in volunteer management have not been widely available until the last decade or two. As a result, many of us were left to train ourselves in the field.

The conflict of professional identity, absence of skills-building resources and lack of recognition of volunteer administration as a legitimate profession often has resulted in frustration and a high turnover in the field.

Today, the field is different. It is expanding, with more volunteer administrators in different types of settings (i.e., zoos, museums, nursing homes, schools, co-ops and corporations). Many professional disciplines are now represented in the field and the number of volunteer administrators is growing. There is a greater recognition that volunteer administration is a profession and heightened awareness of our needs as professionals.

The recent economic crisis and national visibility given to the importance of volunteerism certainly has created some increased credibility to those in the field. However, many other resources have been developing over the years that are having a profound impact on our profession.

We have developed communication and support networks at the local, state and national levels. This most often occurs through professional organizations that were developed as a result of our recognition that, despite our job setting, volunteer administrators do share common goals, issues and concerns that can best be addressed as a group. These organizations provide support to those who are alone in their jobs, as well as provide opportunities to share resources and learn from one another. The organizations may be formal or informal, staffed or unstaffed, single or multi-discipline. Whatever their structure, they are an important asset to volunteer administrators. I would recommend involvement in local, state and national organizations for those who seek to strengthen themselves as professionals.

Some of the national membership organizations are the

- Association for Volunteer Administration
- Association of Voluntary Action Scholars

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- Association of Volunteer Centers
- National Association of Volunteers in Criminal Justice
- National School Volunteer Program
- National Council on Corporate Volunteerism
- American Society of Directors of Volunteer Services.

Similar organizations exist at the local and state level (i.e., DOVIAs, state associations of volunteer directors).

Other types of resource organizations also have been developed to assist us in our jobs. These include organizations such as VOLUNTEER: The National Center for Citizen Involvement, INDEPENDENT SECTOR, state offices on volunteer services, and voluntary action centers/bureaus.

Great strides also have been made in providing a variety of training opportunities in volunteer administration. Ten or 15 years ago little training was available and there was a tendency to attend anything offered in order to meet with our peers. Today, there are many more training opportunities, and we must be selective about choosing those that best meet our individual needs.

It is important for professionals to be familiar with the literature in the field. Many and varied books are now available on a diversity of topics relating to volunteer administration and citizen involvement. To make these publications more accessible, many resource organizations have developed libraries that specialize in publications in our field.

Periodicals now are also available to assist us in keeping up to date in our field. These include *Voluntary Action Leadership*, *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, *Journal of Voluntary Action Research*, *Volunteer Leader*, *Options*, *Volunteering*, *Exchange Networks*, newsletters of state offices on volunteerism and voluntary action centers.

Today, we are more conscious of career mobility and stability. While we still struggle with problems of career identity, community perceptions of the profession, widely diverse compensation schedules and high turnover in the field, we are beginning to address some of those concerns. We are aware of how our skills can be transferred to other professions (personnel and business management, adult education, etc.). However, more volunteer administrators are choosing to remain in the profession and are recognizing their needs for growth in this profession. We, collectively, have some challenges before us as we strengthen our profession:

**Development of Standardized Competencies Needed in the Profession.** Although we work in a diversity of settings, many of our responsibilities as volunteer administrators are similar, as are the skills, talents and experiences needed by those chosen to perform these responsibilities. The Performance-Based Certification in Volunteer Administration program, sponsored by AVA, addresses this need but must be taken further. Not only does this information need to be shared more fully with volunteer administrators, but also with prospective employers. This will raise the awareness of employers of the specific qualifications needed by volunteer administrators and ensure the hiring of qualified professionals. It also has the potential for raising the broader "community" awareness of the profession.

**Preparing People to Enter the Field of Volunteer Administration.** We must ensure that, in the future, professionals are prepared to serve as volunteer administrators during their normal educational experience, rather than after the fact. This means that we must assist in the development of college curricula designed to prepare students for a career in volunteer administration. We should also be developing volunteer management courses in continuing adult education programs.

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**Preparing Other Professionals to Work with Volunteers.** We must also work with colleges and universities to prepare other professionals to work with volunteers. Although the volunteer administrator may have primary responsibility for managing volunteers, most other staff will, at one time or another, interact with them. Therefore, components on working with volunteers should be incorporated into their regular coursework. If this is not done, we will be dealing with problems of "staff-volunteer relationships" forever.

**Development of Career Ladders.** We must work towards the development of career ladders within volunteer administration. At present, there are too few opportunities for advancement and new challenges. We also need a medium for disseminating information on vacancies and career opportunities in the field.

**Communicating the Values of Volunteerism and Volunteer Administrators.** As the spokespersons for the field, we must communicate the values and ethics of volunteerism and our profession to administrators and coworkers, allied professionals, educational institutions, public and private sector policy makers, civil service systems and other credentialing bodies, volunteers and the general public. We also must "practice what we preach" by serving as volunteers ourselves—perhaps within our own agencies, in our local, state and national membership organizations, or in positions of leadership within our communities.

**Following Administrative Practices Comparable to Other Professions.** As a profession, we can learn from other more established professions. We should make sure that we operate with written policies and procedures, a professional code of ethics, consistent standards of performance and evaluation techniques. We should be involved in continuing education and learn to recognize the value of, and adapt

for our use, the resources (i.e., training, consultations, publications) of other professions.

**Sharing Our Resources with Others.** Those of us who have experience in the field need to make a special effort to provide assistance and consultations to new volunteer administrators, as well as to share other resources such as training and materials. Like all other professions, we need mentors. This may be done on an individual basis or in a group setting through professional organizations.

**Recognize Responsibilities to the Larger Volunteer Community.** Volunteer administrators must increasingly serve as advocates for their programs, their volunteers, the larger volunteer community and the future of volunteerism. Advocacy should mean taking stands on legislation and regulations that have an impact on the volunteer community such as volunteer mileage deduction bills, charitable contributions, nonprofit postal rates, lobbying by nonprofit organizations (OMB Circular A-122), etc.

There are also many other ways in which we can affect public policy that has an impact on volunteerism—by lending our expertise in public discussion of issues and by working through our professional membership organizations to address concerns. Some of the issues that need to be addressed in these forms are promoting employment and academic credit for volunteer experience, building relationships between labor and voluntary organizations, developing alternative sources of volunteers, ensuring equal access to volunteer opportunities, providing benefits and protections to volunteers, and developing new types of public/private partnerships to meet community needs.

This is truly an exciting time to work in the field of volunteerism. Numerous changes are occurring in our profession. There are many challenges to address. Although new resources, networks and coalitions are being devel-

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oped, many more changes must occur. We must be part of molding those changes and the future of volunteerism. The alternative is to be put in a position where we are constantly reacting to situations that impact our profession. I believe that, as paid and unpaid professional volunteer administrators, we have the knowledge, experience and responsibility to be pro-active on issues and concerns that affect volunteerism, in order to preserve and enhance this tradition for future generations.