

ADVOCACY

Volunteer-Union Relations: Thoughts and Warnings

By Stephen McCurley

ONE OF THE ISSUES WHICH THE VOLUNTEER COMMUNITY basically has been avoiding in the past few years lies in the relationship between volunteer workers and unions. Two questions in that area seem to be of common concern:

- Should volunteers replace paid staff?
- Should volunteers work during a strike of paid staff?

Other articles in this issue discuss some specifics of the relationship between volunteer workers and unions in the health-care and education fields. This article is an initial exploration of some developments and activities throughout the volunteer community.

The Replacement Question

The question of replacement of paid staff rapidly is becoming of increasing importance. Henry Chapin of the Canadian Council on Social Development noted the essentials in this 1977 description of the Canadian experience:

Traditionally, volunteers in service organizations have been viewed as providing a support service to 'professional' staff; however, recent cutbacks in public and private funding have led many organizations to place volunteers in positions which had previously been filled by staff. This practice has caused a great deal of conflict... Organizations are not aware of the personnel problems, not to mention the ethical considerations, created by using volunteers to replace paid staff... Unions, on the other hand, are preventing volunteers from carrying out essential support services which volunteers are best equipped to handle.

In the United States the issue usually has not been so heated. Many volunteer organizations have attempted to soothe

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union fears by drafting clear statements in this area. The California Volunteer Network's "Direct Service Volunteer Program Standards" contains one of the most definitive statements:

Volunteers shall supplement, not supplant, activities and functions of employees and departmental programs and special projects.

- Volunteers shall not displace a paid worker or be placed in a job slot for which funding is available. This does not mean volunteers cannot apply for paid positions.
- Tasks assigned to a paid worker shall not be removed for the purpose of creating assignments for volunteers.
- Volunteers shall not be substituted for classified staff when authorized positions can be filled.

The Proposition 13 experience in California has brought this question to a head. Many voluntary groups drafted statements reiterating their support for

paid staff. The Los Angeles DOVIA (Directors of Volunteers in Agencies) wrote, "Volunteers cannot be directed or required, nor should they be expected to do that work which can and ought to be done by paid staff." The San Diego Volunteer Bureau noted in its policy, "... within all possible limits, never to place volunteers where they are to replace paid staff."

It soon became apparent, however, that if services were to continue to be delivered in California, some replacement must take place. Volunteer groups now are cooperating, mostly tacitly, to some extent with this replacement effort. As a result, services are being delivered which otherwise would not. The *Wall Street Journal* recently noted the reopening of California libraries through volunteer assistance—in Sonoma County, where 97 part-time volunteers do the work of the 20 displaced paid staff; in San Marino, where 45 volunteers replaced 17 paid staff.

In practice, then, our theory seems to have changed. From an absolute position of nonreplacement we've moved to the following standard: Volunteers should not be responsible for replacement of paid staff, but if outside forces create that vacancy, volunteers may step in to deliver essential services.

That, to be blunt, is a dangerous tightrope to tread.

The Strike Question

Of related concern is the issue of volunteer activities during strikes of paid workers. This question has been dealt with somewhat less directly by voluntary organizations. The National School Volunteer Program is one of the few groups to enact a clear position statement in this area:

The best interest of students is served when volunteers and school staff work cooperatively. In any situation of controversy, the successful relationship between volunteers and teachers can best be maintained if the school volunteer program adopts a position of neutrality. In the event of a strike or other interruptions of normal school operations, the school volunteer program shall not function in the schools.—*Joint statement of the National School Volunteer Program and the National Education Association*

The union position, naturally enough, is against volunteer activity during strikes. This includes regular program volunteering and replacement volunteers. William Lucy, secretary-treasurer

of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), described it as follows:

During strikes, a volunteer's proper position should be as a neutral bystander. Certainly, the volunteer shouldn't cross a picket line and take a regular worker's job. This neutral stance is dictated both by humanitarianism and rationality.

The field position on this issue is mixed. A survey done by NCVA in 1976 produced the following results:

	YES	NO
● Should volunteers continue to work during a strike of paid staff?	1,584	1,058
● Should volunteers take on duties of striking paid workers?	860	1,876

The reason most commonly cited for continuing volunteer work during a strike is that of the need for emergency help, particularly applicable for volunteers in the health field. For example, the *New York Times* reported on a nursing home strike in New York City in 1978 where volunteers came in to care for almost 20,000 residents.

This issue should also become more pronounced as a result of the Proposition 13 movement. As budgets are cut, strikes should become more frequent and more important as a negotiation device, with volunteer programs caught in the middle.

The Remaining Questions

In essence, volunteer programs must decide who are their real clients—those in need of services or the staff with whom they serve.

One of our most powerful arguments for volunteer usage has been that volunteers can stand outside the system and provide impartial advice and care to those in need. On the other hand, harsh realities may dictate compromise if programs are to avoid conflict with staff and eventual dissolution. And we must learn to consider the equally real needs of the staff, either to retain their jobs or to obtain better conditions.

If your organization hasn't thought about the above questions, it's time that it does. They involve both ethical and practical considerations with grave implications.

Please let us know what you decide, or what further questions you have. Write: National Affairs, VOLUNTEER, 1214 16th St., NW, Washington, DC 20036