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Advocacy for Volunteer Involvement: The Role of Funders

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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No matter how long I work in this field, I simply will never understand why so few of our attempts at educating decision-makers seem to stick. We are constantly repeating our advocacy efforts whenever new executives come on board - too often starting again at square one. I actually discussed this in 1999 in my [August Hot Topic](#). This issue is once again "hot" because of a recent rash of inexplicable budget cuts, reorganizing decisions, and other actions severely limiting or even eliminating volunteer program resources that - to those of us in the field - seemed to be successful and effective. In almost every case, the changes have been done rapidly and with no apparent thoughtfulness or sense of consequence.

There are a number of key misconceptions that continue to fuel ignorant decision-making. We have to find ways to emphasize the following:

Volunteer Involvement Is **NOT**:

- Free
- A second choice
- An alternative to adequate paid staffing
- Simply a part of fundraising or development
- Exactly like paid personnel management-or completely separate from it
- Basically a problem of recruitment, not of organizational competence
- Dying, old-fashioned, or unattractive to skilled people
- A low-level management function that anyone can do
- Something the paid staff welcomes or is capable of supporting
- A responsibility that can be done as an "add on" to the job of an already-overworked employee
- Extremely hard to control, measure, or hold to high standards
- Self-evidently good p.r., no matter how volunteers are treated

- Inherently risky
- Synonymous with the "nonprofit" or "voluntary" sector (or NGOs)
- Always labeled "volunteering"
- "Uniquely American"

But It IS:

- Universal and international
- A specialty management area
- As effective as the thought and effort put into it
- Too often underutilized and undervalued
- A way to expand the talents and skills available to an organization
- Access to perspectives specifically different from those of paid staff
- Intimately related to:
 - Fundraising
 - PR/Visibility
 - Outreach
 - Client development
- Something Executive Directors and the Board need to consider
- A part of the resource mix
- A way to dream and experiment with new service ideas
- A way to demonstrate an organization matters to the community

Over time, I have come to believe that funders have an obligation to force executives to make better decisions about volunteers. If foundations, major donors, and government agencies insisted on appropriate integration of volunteers in service planning and delivery, I predict we'd see immediate attention to volunteer management issues.

Jane Leighty Justis is crusading on this very topic in the foundation world, as she explained in an interview in *e-Volunteerism* last year <http://www.e-volunteerism.com/quarterly/00fall/justisintro>. I agree with her advocacy and propose that, collectively, we find ways to get funders to:

1. REQUIRE all grant proposals to include a section on how volunteers will be involved in the new project;
2. ENCOURAGE requests to fund the position of volunteer services manager.
3. EXPECT reports on the degree of volunteer involvement achieved (quantity) and its impact (quality).
4. REJECT proposals from organizations unwilling to consider how the right volunteers might expand the success of their programs.

It is my opinion that an organization seeking gifts of cash while refusing donations of talent is not a good steward of resources. Since "money talks," funders have a strong effect on the ways that agencies operate. If volunteer involvement becomes more integrated with organizational development, and is rewarded with more funds, then executives and other staff will seek education in how to do it the right way.

So the question this month is:

How might we reach funders and advocate for greater attention to volunteer involvement?

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Posted 27Sep01

Submitted by Jayne Cravens, United Nations Volunteers, Bonn, Germany

I would add, to what volunteer involvement is NOT, this:

- a line on your annual report showing how much money your organization saved
- a value based in dollars (or Euros) per hour contributed

I would add, to what volunteer involvement is, this:

- a better way to serve clients and the community than using only staff
- an asset to staff that will help their work focus even more on meeting an organization's mission.

Volunteer managers need to take the initiative in their organizations and work directly with those creating grant proposals, the organization's annual report, etc., to insert information about the impact of volunteer's on the organization's work (and remember to state this BEYOND DOLLAR AMOUNTS). Volunteer managers also need to start taking initiative and going to funding fairs, corporate philanthropy presentations and what not, and asking the questions and bringing up the topics Susan has brought up in this hot topic!

Posted 25Sep01

Submitted by Manon Ellis Williams, Volunteering Development Officer, Wales Council for Voluntary Action, Wales, UK

As part of the plans being developed in Wales for the United Nations International Year of Volunteers 2001 (IYV2001) a Lobbying and Campaigning subgroup has been formed to use IYV2001 to address issues which affect many voluntary organisations in Wales. One aspect of volunteering that is currently being looked at is the need for good practice in volunteering projects and the costs incurred from implementing this.

The group hopes to use the occasion of IYV2001 to highlight the need for recognition by funding bodies that in order to implement good practice in volunteering, additional funding support may be required for areas such as volunteer training and expenses. The group is working in partnership with the Wales Funders Forum to develop a joint policy statement addressing this issue. The statement would acknowledge that the cost to organisations in ensuring good practice is a reasonable expense to include in funding bids and one that has substantial benefits for all stakeholders.

This piece of work aims to encourage funders to:

- recognise the value of volunteering to the local community
- recognise the value of volunteering to the individual who volunteers
- recognise that in order to maximise the benefits gained by the community and the individuals involved, organisations involving volunteers need to adopt good practice in the support and management of their volunteers
- recognise that this good practice requires funding and is a reasonable expense to include in funding bids

Posted 12Sep01

Submitted by Dawn Savidge, Volunteer Manager - FOCUS, Nottingham, England

What a refreshing article. I have been volunteering for my organisation for over two years now and have recently been employed as the new Volunteer Manager. Funders and employers of voluntary organisations really cannot underestimate the powerful impact that Volunteer Managers can have on an organisation. After all, it's true that if we spent time investing in our volunteers, we will reap the rewards. I am very excited with my role and come with a lot of experience from not only managing volunteers, but also being a volunteer myself too.

Posted 07Sep01

Submitted by Helen Rusich, Volunteer Manager, Terra Association, Alberta, Canada

The potential for volunteers to contribute at least in our organization is great. However the nature of our organization is such that clients and their children are protected at all costs (pregnant and parenting teens). This makes for interesting debate on what volunteers are capable and qualified to do. We have them doing all kinds of interesting stuff, mentors (program I've been waiting for 1 1/2 years), labour support, Friends-to-Teens. The staff needs training in managing volunteers, however the importance of this is not a priority to management. The volunteer managers position is not full time. Some board members of this organization do not feel like volunteers. I often wonder what they do feel like. I've had to remind them they are volunteers, despite being retired, having professional outside work, etc. It is a huge job to educate my own colleagues on what volunteerism is and is not. Thanks for beginning a list that will help, perhaps to have management think about.

Posted 07Sep01

Submitted by Tom Rinkoski, Director, Volunteer Services, Green Bay, Wisconsin

Ah! Yes! I feel the pain. I am a regional volunteer trainer for the Catholic Church, and have observed

the same problem in that institution. This strikes me as ironic because our denomination has a marvelous theological backing for volunteerism. But still it makes the mistake of playing into the items you place in the category of "volunteer involvement is not". Thus proving that good intent or even wise philosophy does not speak to issues alone. I get asked a lot to "solve" this dilemma by teaching recruitment skills, when I observe organizational competence issues at the core of the problem. Exceptions exist and they are telling. The churches for whom this is not a significant problem are those with strong community spirits and high degrees of affiliation from their members. I have even seen sub groups in churches with high volunteer involvement, like a church youth group, even when surrounded by a almost dead organization, when the leader of said youth group is charismatic in his/her leadership and forging a group identity. In the case of churches, who so clearly depend on their volunteers, it strikes me as odd that they invest so little in them.

Posted 07Sep01

Submitted by Lori Burkart, Team NASA Volunteer Mgr/Education Mgr

Thank you for writing this. I especially can relate to volunteer management as a specialty management field and not an add on to an already over loaded manager. There is a constant opportunity to educate and re-educate an organization on these principles.

Posted 07Sep01

Submitted by Cissy Seibel, Director, Volunteer Center, Center For Nonprofit Resources, Ohio USA

This topic hits my "hot" button! How many volunteer administrators take the time to clearly show the "impact" of their volunteers? We are professionals and as such we must do more than advocate and speak up on behalf of our programs. Passion is not enough to garner the attention of Boards or funders. Money talks. As a result we, as professionals, need to show the dramatic program, dollar and donor impact of volunteers. As an example, a small city government near here actually had their HR person calculate the dollar amount of each clerical position. That went to the City Commissioners office. Over \$1M dollars in volunteer time and a large part of their annual report! Make your fund development person your new "best friend." Show them the dollar amount and savings created by effective partnerships with your volunteers. Refer to your volunteers as Ambassadors (and internally as Donors) because that IS what they are. Make sure the impact of your program is an integral part of the annual report and reports to funders. Finally, tell your Board and grant writer the value of volunteers in time, talent and dollars. Then, tell them again, and again, and again. We must, like any program, show our dollar, our donor value and our program impact. It is up to us as professionals to "shout it loud and long." If we remain silent we doom our programs to dismissal.

Posted 05Sep01

Submitted by Margo Ashmore, Consultant, several organizations, Minnesota, Hennepin County

In very small, community-based and arts organizations, the " "management" are volunteers on a board of directors. If there is paid staff, it tends to either be high-turnover (because of low pay), or invested forever (and in danger of being a dynasty that excludes diverse participation). These are often working boards, but they miss bringing in a lot of other talent that "knows better than to get sucked in to the politics, or the overwork." Community foundations and other funders could routinely

sponsor or co-sponsor workshops, and then score proposals based on evidence that an effective contingent of the board have been exposed to volunteer management principles. There are lots of workshops on effective grant-writing, because funders appreciate a good proposal. We can create a taste for these competencies, too. To encourage this, we need to demonstrate the dollars stretched or stabilized by the presence of good volunteer programs.

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